

HISTORY AS HUMAN BEHAVIOR

*By Samuel P. Hays**

The study of history in both high schools and colleges, it seems to me, suffers from a lack of emphasis on the vital human quality of the past. It is concerned traditionally with the formal and outward aspects of events, and not with human experience, understanding, values, and action. This problem is the central theme of this paper. I hope primarily to suggest a number of ways in which we might approach more closely the human side of the past. By this I mean not simply ways of enhancing the "human interest" factor in history, but ways of systematically studying human experience and behavior so that solid and concrete generalizations emerge. My argument is that if we could develop this approach to history we would not only have a more significant story to tell, but would also arouse greater interest on the part of both high school and college students.

I

Perhaps the best example of formal history is the traditional political history which abounds in our textbooks. Here the major focus of organization centers around presidential administrations: nominating conventions, campaigns, cabinet meetings, the administration's legislative program and its treatment by Congress. This approach has been called "presidential history." Its main justification is not that it conforms to any major movements or changes in American society, but that it follows the rather accidental fact of our four-year presidential terms. It provides little room for an emphasis on political experience and behavior, nor does it give more than a brief insight into the ebb and flow of activity lying behind the outward events.

Economic history suffers from the same attention to the outward and formal, and the lack of attention to the dynamics of change. In most of our history books we learn about the rise of corporate combinations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We describe the legal forms

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involved — the trust and the holding company — and we relate the number and size of combinations. But rarely do we go into the forces behind this. Rarely do we analyze the economic processes which led to the rise of such large combinations of capital. If we did this, we would spend less time talking about the number and size of combinations, and more about the way in which cheap transportation created, for the first time, a national market; the way in which a national market created, for the first time, intense competition for that market; the way in which producers all over the country tried to protect themselves against competition; and the way in which all economic segments of the nation began to take up collective effort to exercise control over market conditions. These economic processes are far more important than are figures about the number of combinations.

It is precisely this formal approach to history which makes history unsatisfactory to many students. Those who seek an analysis of human society often fail to find it in history and go elsewhere. These views stem from conversations with a great number of students about both their high school and their college history courses. I have come to the conclusion that the more a history course touches the human content of the past the more challenging and satisfying it is to the student. Those courses which are dull and boring seem to consist of memorization of the outward and formal facts of history; those which are more exciting involve a treatment of human experience, human understanding, and human values.

In my own teaching I have observed that the closer one approaches the human situation the more interest rises. I do not mean this in terms of the popular definition of "human interest," such as the last words of Nathan Hale, or the stock market manipulations of Jim Fisk and Jay Gould, or the illegitimate offspring of Grover Cleveland, or Coxey's army. I mean simply the systematic description of human experience, of the universal human situation faced by people in the past and which are faced by students in the present. I find, for example, that students react very positively to such a book as that by Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, an account of the immigrant in America told from the point of view of the immigrant, an analysis of his experience of being uprooted from a traditional and stable European culture and abruptly entering a more mobile and traditionless society. Handlin's major contribution is that he sees history from the inside out. And this I think challenges students and captures their imagination, because all of us inevitably see life from the inside out.

Both of these general concerns point, it seems to me, in one direction — that history must be considered more in terms of human behavior. The reason that much of history is formal and unsatisfying is because the units of history we write and talk and teach about do not consist of types of human experience, thought, and behavior. By changing to this focus we can make history more meaningful from the point of view of the disinterested analyst, and also from the point of view of the student who will inevitably find some contact between his own experience and that of the past.

II

One important way in which we could make this change in focus is to shift attention from top-level affairs to grass-roots happenings. Most of our history is a description of events at the center of national politics, economic affairs, or intellectual life. This is true, for example, of the "presidential history" approach; it focuses on the activities of the office of the President and of Congress. This kind of history is easy to write because materials for it are usually available in a central place. And it is easy to teach because it is a simple way of giving a single focus to history. It is easier to talk about one President than about fifty governors; it is easier to describe the ideas of a few thinkers than of a large number of people. Yet, at the same time, it provides only a partial and limited view, and the limitations of the view can readily be realized once one focuses his attention closer to the grass-roots, to the state, the county, or municipal level. Evidence from this level indicates that top-level history not only leaves out many aspects of the past but often leads to the wrong conclusions.

Consider, for example, the period from 1877 to 1914. According to the traditional approach in history, the major development of the time was the so-called "trust" issue, the growth of business combinations, their influence in politics and government, and the reaction against them on the part of many segments of the community. Most of the chapters in our textbooks for this period are organized around some phase of this question, and evidence from the local or state level is selected to illustrate this national focus. The history of Iowa in the early twentieth century, for example, involves the Progressive revolt within the Republican party, described primarily as a reaction against railroad domination of Iowa politics, and considered to be merely another illustration of a national political trend.

But if one looks at evidence from grass-roots history for its own sake, and not as an illustration of national trends, he frequently comes to an

altogether different conclusion. For example, an examination of the precinct voting patterns in Iowa from 1885 to 1918 shows that the matters which most aroused voters, which determined party affiliations, and which filled the local newspapers were not connected with the "trust question" but were largely cultural in nature. They were such questions as the use of foreign language, Sunday observance, and above all prohibition. Defined in terms of how people voted, which is about as close to the grass-roots as one can get, the "trust question" was relatively unimportant, but the prohibition issue was of vast importance. Party differences in voting patterns were cultural, not economic, in nature. If one can argue that a single issue was more important than any other issue in Iowa between 1885 and 1918 it was prohibition.

But prohibition was more than an issue; it was the most specific aspect of a general conflict between patterns of culture in Iowa which dominated the political views of the people of the state for many years. One of these cultural patterns we can call, for want of a better term, Pietism. It stressed strict standards of behavior derived from Puritan sources, especially Sunday observance, and prohibition of gambling, dancing, and, above all, drinking alcoholic beverages. It was evangelistic; it exhorted individuals to undergo a dramatic transformation in their personal lives, to be converted, and it sought to impose these standards of personal character on the entire community by public, legal action. But there were others, whose pattern of culture was altogether different, who resisted these views. They came from a different cultural background, and their religion consisted more of a sequence of rituals and observances through which one passed from birth to death, with the primary focus of religion being the observance of those practices. For many of them Puritan morals meant little; Germans, for example, were accustomed to the continental Sunday of relaxation in beer gardens or to using wine for communion services.

These cultural differences divided groups in Iowa, and the voting patterns follow, to a remarkable degree, the differences in cultural patterns. On the one hand were the native Americans, from English and Scotch extraction, the Norwegians and Swedes, and the German Methodists and Presbyterians. On the other hand were the Irish, Bohemian, and German Catholics and the German Lutherans. In county after county in Iowa the persistently strong Republican precincts from 1885 to 1914 are predominantly from the first group, and the persistently strong Democratic pre-

cincts are from the second. Consider, for example, the precincts in Carroll County, Iowa. The eastern tier of townships, Jasper, Glidden, Richland, and Union, all strong native American (77, 84, 83, and 91 per cent, respectively, in 1880), between 1887 and 1914 averaged 33, 26, 34, and 33 per cent, respectively for the Democratic gubernatorial candidate. In the northwestern part of the county, on the other hand, four townships, Kniest, Wheatland, Roselle, and Washington, all heavily German (91, 78, 95, and 80 per cent, respectively, in 1880) and all heavily Catholic, over the same period of time and for the same race averaged 82, 83, 80, and 73 per cent Democratic. In displaying real distinctions in voting patterns, Carroll County is typical of most Iowa counties.

These were persistent distinctions, and led frequently to the importance of such issues as prohibition and woman's suffrage, which was part and parcel of the prohibition movement. In some elections they produced rather violent shifts in voting sentiment. In fact, one can argue that the only violent shifts in voting behavior came when such issues were present. The most striking of these was the gubernatorial election of 1916 when the Republican candidate, William Lloyd Harding, was an avowed "wet" and the Democratic candidate, Edwin T. Meredith, was "bone dry." This reversed the traditional roles of the parties; as a result many traditionally Democratic precincts voted heavily Republican, and some traditionally Republican precincts voted Democratic. There was no gubernatorial election up to the depression of 1929 which stirred voters so deeply.

When one begins to examine grass-roots behavior through election data at the precinct level or through local newspapers, one sees immediately that it was this kind of issue that stirred people deeply, that determined their political attitudes. It was far more important than the trust issue. By using this approach one feels that he is approaching more closely the human content of politics. It is becoming increasingly clear to me that very little of our top-level politics is understandable unless one knows the grass-roots context in which to place the top-level events. And basically what this means is that we have to examine what people feel and think and experience, and see their political action as a product of those inner events.

III

A second important shift in thinking that we must undergo concerns our notion of the significance of the role of government in American life. No phenomenon has more preoccupied historians of recent America than has

this one. But it is usually treated in such a way as to obscure rather than to illuminate the meaning of an increasing role of government. We have especially failed to distinguish between government as an end in itself, and government as a means to an end. All instances of increased federal functions, and all movements in that direction are considered by historians to be a part of the same historical trend, while all tendencies opposed to such federal functions are of a different development. "Presidential history" confirms this approach, for the ideology of top-level political battles is usually cast in terms of the desirability of more or less government. But these categories obscure the most important question, namely, what are the purposes to which government is put? History, it seems to me, should be organized around the goals of human action, not the techniques, around the ends rather than the means.

There are many cases in recent American history in which two tendencies, both of which increase the role of government and therefore appear to be of the same historical trend, may involve different and contradictory goals, and therefore be of quite different historical movements. Consider, for example, railroad regulation. The Hepburn Act establishing effective railroad regulation was passed in 1906. During the First World War the United States government operated the railroads under the United States Railroad Administration. After the war there was a debate over whether or not the railroads should be returned to their private owners. The debate culminated in the Transportation Act of 1920, by which the roads were returned. This Act, it has been argued, was a reversal of past trends; the logical extension of the spirit of the Hepburn Act would have been continued government ownership. The Transportation Act of 1920, on the other hand, was merely a part of the dominant private enterprise philosophy of the postwar era, of "the return to normalcy."

This reasoning is logical if one considers the problem purely as one of distinguishing between more or less government action. But the whole question becomes more complex when one asks: who wanted what and why? What groups were involved in the passage of both the Hepburn Act and the Transportation Act of 1920? Evidence concerning this problem discloses that the very groups which wanted more regulation in 1906 and fought for the Hepburn Act opposed continued government operation in 1920 and wanted the railroads returned to their private owners. In terms of the groups involved and their goals, then, the Transportation Act of

1920 with continued private ownership was not a reversal but a continuation of the tendencies behind the Hepburn Act. And if public ownership had become a reality, it would have been a sharp departure from the recent past.

The major force behind railroad regulation consisted of the organized shippers of the country, who wanted lower rates and better services. Although farmers constituted the voting support for the movement, the drive was led by merchants and manufacturers who shipped via railroad and who were organized in the Interstate Commerce Law Convention. After the passage of the Hepburn Act these groups used the machinery of the Interstate Commerce Commission to their advantage. Up until the First World War they were able to prevent attempts by both railroad owners and railroad labor to raise rates. But once the United States government took over the railroads and operated them, these advantages were lost. The powers of the Interstate Commerce Commission were suspended, and as a result the shippers lost a powerful friend at court. The railroads were placed in the hands of leaders in the industry who were brought into the Railroad Administration, and for the first time since the Hepburn Act the roads received substantial rate increases, and labor, in turn, received substantial wage increases. The shippers were unable to protest, for their machinery of appeal no longer existed. It was little wonder, therefore, that following the war shippers asked that railroads be returned to their private owners and that the powers of the Interstate Commerce Commission be restored. These were provided in the Transportation Act of 1920.

These events are easily traceable if one examines as evidence the ideas and actions of the groups themselves which wanted railroad control. In Iowa the two most active of these groups among farmers, for example, were the Farmers Grain Dealers Association of Iowa, a state-wide trade association of farmer-owned grain cooperatives, and the Corn Belt Meat Producers Association, an organization of car-lot shippers of cattle and hogs. Both were concerned with sales problems, and both used railroads heavily for shipping. The proceedings of their conventions and the correspondence of their executive secretaries provides abundant evidence of their shipping problems and of their dissatisfaction with the operations of the United States Railroad Administration. And yet, strangely enough, while historians have written much about such general farm organizations as the National Grange, the Farmers' Union, and the American Society of Equity, they

have barely mentioned either the Grain Dealers or the Meat Producers. The reason, it seems to me, is because they cannot be readily used as a local illustration of a nationally-defined top-level political problem. And yet examination of their situation and their views on the state level helps enormously to redefine the character of national politics.

Government can be viewed most effectively by the historian if it is considered not as an end in itself, but as the context within which political struggles take place. All political groups in society contend for the control of the advantages which government has to offer: a shifting of the tax burden, positive financial aid, legal aid to restrict individual action where private groups cannot do so, or restrictions on competing groups. No one group seems to have a monopoly on the desire for positive government or for its elimination. The railroads, for example, were grateful for the stabilization of rates which the Interstate Commerce Commission provided. Consequently, the understanding of any particular government function must rest upon an analysis of the circumstances which give rise to that function, the groups which demand it, and the ends which will be served through it. And the categories in which we organize history must be in terms of those circumstances, groups, and goals, rather than the fact of government itself.

IV

An excellent opportunity for undertaking a grass-roots approach to history is provided by the use of election statistics. But this involves a different approach to the analysis of elections than we have used in the past. Elections are dealt with rather extensively in a "presidential history" approach, but usually only in terms of who won or who lost and by what percentage of the vote. Such an analysis is extremely limited, and yields very little understanding. It would be far more important to know how much change in voting sentiment had occurred since the last election, not just what percentage of the votes a winning candidate received. For the major fact in any election for the historian is change, and the amount of change usually determines the importance of the problem for study.

A "presidential history" approach may completely distort this whole question by emphasizing only the shift from one political party to another, while frequently the most important changes in voting sentiment occur without a change in party dominance. Suppose, for example, that the Democrats won the presidential election of 1948 by 50.1 per cent of the

vote, and suppose that the Republicans in 1952 won also by 50.1 per cent. A complete change in party would have involved a change in Republican voting strength of only two-tenths of a percentage point. Suppose, further, that Eisenhower won in 1956 with 60.1 per cent of the vote. This victory involved no change in party, but an increase in 10 percentage points, or 50 times the shift in vote between 1948 and 1952. Which is the more important election? Where is the turning point? A "presidential history" approach would place the break at 1952, but in terms of voting change it would be 1956.

Many important shifts in voting behavior can be obscured not only by a "presidential history" approach, but also by failing to extend the analysis down to the grass-roots level. For example, Herbert Hoover won the presidential election of 1928 by a landslide margin. But one of the most significant facts of the election is that despite Hoover's victory, Al Smith, for the first time in the twenties, and perhaps for the first time since the Civil War, won for the Democratic party a majority of the votes in the nation's twelve largest cities. The Democrats had been gaining in the metropolitan areas in the early 1920's and by 1928 had won a slight majority. These facts have been brought out only in very recent years. They were hidden by the over-all election returns. But they point to the highly significant fact that the Democratic party was gaining strength in crucial areas of the country prior to the depression, and they open up a whole new understanding of the impact of cultural factors in politics in the twenties.

One could give many examples of the possibilities of going behind the results of a single election to see changes in political behavior, but perhaps a few drawn from Iowa politics would be most appropriate. Consider, for example, political changes since 1950 in the state and specifically in Des Moines. Politics in Des Moines since the early depression has revolved primarily around socio-economic factors, with the lower income groups constituting the center of strength of the Democratic party, and the upper income groups the Republican party. The line of division is very clear geographically; that part of Des Moines west of Harding Road is strongly Republican, and that part to the east is strongly Democratic.

Gubernatorial elections between 1946 and 1956 revealed this split in party majority very clearly, but they also revealed that while the Democratic candidates gained steadily in the county as a whole over that period, they gained most in the lower income areas east of Harding Road. On the

other hand, they lost ground in the higher income areas to the west. For example, between 1946 and 1956, five of the precincts west of Harding Road, of the highest socio-economic level, registered a Democratic loss of 19 percentage points, while six to the east of the lowest socio-economic level, registered a Democratic gain of 23 percentage points. The trend, therefore, has been in opposite directions. This is somewhat unusual in elections, for it is more typical for the trend to be toward or away from a party in the same direction in all precincts, with a variation in the degree of the trend from precinct to precinct. A shift in opposite directions at the same time indicates a sharp and unusual cleavage of political interests.

Much of the same kind of problem can be illuminated by examining the voting behavior of precincts in Cedar Rapids since the depression of 1929. Here there are three major groups of voters. In the southwest part of the city are voters of Bohemian descent who have been traditionally Democratic. To the east and northeast are voters of native American descent, for the most part, of middle and upper socio-economic levels, and traditionally Republican. To the northwest are working class groups largely of native-American extraction; these were strongly Republican up until the depression of 1929, largely because of the cultural issues of nationality, language, and custom which were sharp in Cedar Rapids during that time. But the depression produced a greater concern for economic issues and led to this northwest area of the city voting less and less like the northeast and more and more like the southwest. It has voted Democratic in gubernatorial races since 1944.

In both Des Moines and Cedar Rapids, therefore, one can observe a gradual shifting of political alignments around socio-economic differences. These factors are obscured merely by observing the party strength for the entire county. They can be brought out by examining the returns at the precinct level, which greatly add to our understanding of political behavior.

One type of election which sharply reveals the social and economic structure of a community is the so-called "non-partisan" municipal contest. Stripped of the restraining influence of party discipline, these elections frequently bring out in full force latent intra-community tensions. Contests over the commission form of government, the so-called Des Moines plan, in Iowa in 1908 are excellent cases in point. In Des Moines, Cedar Rapids and Davenport the plan was pushed forward by the business and professional classes of the community on the one hand, and by native American

moral reformers on the other in order to secure political power in municipal affairs and to carry out the various policies that they desired. In each city, however, major elements of the working class and immigrant communities vigorously opposed the plan because they interpreted it as a device to deprive them of political influence and to institute such policies as prohibition which they opposed. In Des Moines workingmen succeeded in defeating the "businessmen's slate" of candidates for the first commission government. In Cedar Rapids, the South-end Bohemian population fought, though unsuccessfully, the commission plan as an attempt by the inhabitants of "piety hill," the northern and eastern sections of the city, to secure control of municipal affairs. And in Davenport the Germans, fearing strict enforcement of anti-liquor laws, succeeded in defeating the proposal to inaugurate a commission government. Precinct and ward voting data in these contests, when related to nativity, religious and income factors, clearly brings out the forces involved in the election and the persistent cultural and socio-economic structure of the entire community.

Much, then, can be gained by using election returns as a device for studying political behavior and changes in that behavior. Perhaps the greatest opportunity this approach can provide in an over-all way is to give us a systematic method of dividing up the units of political history in terms other than presidential administrations. One can construct an index of political change by computing the percentage strength of a particular party in each election, for example, the Republican presidential vote, and plotting it on a graph. Or one can secure an index which reveals change every two years, rather than at four-year intervals, by plotting the party strength in Congress (congressional popular voting statistics are not yet compiled in usable form). Such a graph would provide a rough outline of political change somewhat like a business cycle does for economic change.

This kind of graph reveals several broad trends: (a) from 1874 to 1894 a stalemate between the two parties, with the Democrats winning four of five presidential elections by popular vote, but the Republicans winning three of the five by electoral vote, and with the Democrats winning the House of Representatives eight out of ten times and the Republicans controlling the Senate seven out of ten times; (b) 1894-1910, a period of Republican dominance; (c) a Democratic rise beginning in 1906, reaching a peak in 1914, and declining to a low point in 1920; (d) a Republican rise beginning in 1916, reaching a high plateau from 1920 to 1928, and

declining to a low point in 1936; (e) a Democratic rise, beginning in 1924 in the cities, reaching a high point in 1936, and declining to a low point in 1946. These units of political history, it seems to me, are much more appropriate than are presidential administrations. It is curious that many problems which these units pose, such as the reason for the shift from stalemate between 1874 and 1894 to Republican dominance for sixteen years, have never been answered by historians primarily because the questions have never been asked. The value of developing units of voting behavior for study, then, is primarily one of bringing to our attention questions which have heretofore been obscured.

V

Each of these examples — the importance of cultural issues as opposed to the trust question, the analysis of the role of government as a means to an end, and the possibility of using election data to define problems in history — involves a refocusing of attention from the outward formal aspects of history toward the level of human behavior. Each constitutes an attempt to categorize history in terms of types of human experience, types of human understanding of the world, types of human values, and types of resulting human action. This is a group analysis of society in which one sorts out events in history in terms of social organization and behavior. It offers, it seems to me, a much fuller, a more satisfying, and a more provocative approach to the study and writing of history.

There are several factors, however, which make this approach difficult to undertake at the present time. One is the simple fact that few historical studies and many fewer textbooks are written from this point of view. Most texts are organized in a formal, descriptive style, often from the point of view of "presidential history." On the college level most texts have chapters on presidential administrations, with a few on economic or social history sandwiched in between. There is little attempt to integrate all this around patterns of behavior. High school texts, for the most part, follow the same general pattern.

On the other hand, there is considerable reading material which does have a different slant and which can be used. One which I have already mentioned is Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted*. A book which provides a good picture of the role of cultural groups in political life is Samuel Lubell's *The Future of American Politics*. Two excellent studies of state political life which touch the grass roots closely are V. O. Key, American State

Politics, and Gordon Baker, *Rural Versus Urban Political Power*. An excellent case study of the goals implicit in public action is Stephen Kemp Bailey, *Congress Makes a Law*, a study of the political forces behind the Full Employment Act of 1946. The movements behind the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 are examined in Lee Benson, *Merchants, Farmers and Railroads*. These, of course, are only a few of a number of books which provide a slant toward history more in terms of human behavior.

But there is a far more important roadblock which grass-roots history faces, namely, the difficulty in resisting prevailing public assumptions about what ought to be taught in history courses. A behavioral approach immediately raises questions involving group differences in society, differences between ethnic, religious, or socio-economic groups. And in our society it is not considered legitimate to talk about such differences; instead we are expected to paint a picture of a unified, all-community spirit to support a kind of community patriotism and loyalty. Every community resists introspection into its own social, economic, and political structure, and equally resists history which examines the same questions.

For example, would teachers in Carroll, Allamakee, Winnishiek, or Jones counties, in Davenport, Cedar Rapids, or Des Moines feel free to delve into the whole range of cultural and economic differences which have long existed there and which throughout the years have determined the course of politics? How freely does one in Davenport discuss in the classroom the full implications of cultural conflict represented by the different names "Cork Hill" and "Sauerkraut Hill" which used to describe the Irish and German areas, east and west of Brady Street? How freely in Des Moines does one talk about the political differences between Grand Avenue and the downtown area, especially the "bottoms" at the junction of the Des Moines and the Raccoon rivers, and the way in which urban reform for over sixty years has pitted upper-class business and professional people against lower-class laboring groups? How freely can one in Carroll County discuss the religious and cultural differences between the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant eastern tier of townships and the remaining German Catholic townships? Or how freely in almost any small town can one discuss the "pecking order" among the churches, or the community hierarchy of power and control, in the face of the ideology that the community is one big happy family? Two sociologists, Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman, have done just that in a study called *Small Town in Mass Society*. Their approach would be use-

ful in examining any Iowa small town, past or present, but it brings to light factors in social structure and human behavior which community boosters usually do not appreciate.

And yet the attempt to skip quickly over such fundamental human features of history only does the study of history a disservice, and in my view is one reason why history frequently repels rather than attracts students. Most students know first hand the realities of social and community life, enough to know what is legitimate to talk about and what is not. To obscure these realities in history and social studies courses is to earn a reputation for talking about the unimportant and to court a pose of hypocrisy in the eyes of students. The more we refuse to get down to the human level of history at the grass roots, the more history will be looked upon as dealing only with the formal and the outward and will be shunned. The more we explore the realities of human life, on the other hand, the more students will look upon history as a significant study worth their time and effort.