

Murphey Symposium

Ideology and Utopia: Philosophical Fantasies of Historical Knowledge

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I recently came upon an extraordinary book review, probably the most extraordinary review I've seen in years in a proper professional journal. I mention it because it's a review of Murray Murphey's most extraordinary book.

There are, of course, lots of reviewers who don't really understand the book they're reviewing. But most of them think they do understand, and most of those who suspect they don't do their damndest to escape exposure. Mark Hamilton Lytle simply admits from the start that he is in over his head. He's got to fill perhaps 600 words without embarrassing himself. At one point he hits upon the expedient of reproducing verbatim the eight premises that inform Murray's argument; and as those eight premises sit there, neatly numbered, on the august pages of the *Journal of American History*, taking up fully a fourth of the review, it is impossible not to imagine Lytle congratulating himself on this inspired ploy. Indeed, as he approaches the conclusion of his assignment, it is impossible not to imagine him heaving a sigh of relief to be so near the end of his ordeal.

Nonetheless, Lytle is an honest man. Once safely arrived at his summation, he admits openly what he has already implied. "This book is not beach reading," he confides. "It will appeal only to those historians with a taste for metaphysics. Sadly, this reviewer is not one of them."

Of course, it would please me profoundly to say that I polished Murray's book off at the beach last summer. But the truth is, I probably don't understand

it either. Murray is simply smarter than the rest of us are, or at any rate he's smarter than I am. Besides, he's outlandishly more widely read, in formal philosophy, in several sorts of academic psychology, in mathematics, in science, and even, I discover, in the history and analysis of dead languages.

It's not for nothing that he was my idol when I was an undergraduate and that he's my idol still.

Rather than speak, though, of what I may not understand, I will speak of what I surely don't understand. I don't understand where Murray's new book is coming from, or why. In speaking of my inability to understand, I will focus on the cultural relativism that I thought—mistakenly, I now think—that I learned from him. But my befuddlement goes deeper than doctrine. It goes beyond epistemology and ontology to temperament.

In my student days and long, long after, I was often saddened by what seemed to me a streak of sadness in Murray. It was not just the bleakness in his words. It was the weariness in his sigh, a weariness which somehow caught, more piercingly than language ever could, the sorrow of our existence and the certainty that the bastards would grind us down.

In *Philosophical Foundations*, I find a Murray Murphey I never suspected: a cockeyed optimist, who thinks that historians can be and indeed are practitioners of a human science, that all of us can and indeed do understand each other across cultural divides, and that we can and indeed do, by our cultivation of science, steadily improve the quality of our collective life.

I want to quarrel—or at least suggest a quarrel—with all three of those positions. But before I do, I want to confess that I am deeply disoriented by them. I am unsettled by what I see in them of Murray, and I am still more unsettled by what I discover in my reaction to them of myself. I never expected to find Murray a dreamer of hopeful dreams, and I am chagrined to show myself a curmudgeon. At least in regard to myself, the truth hurts.

I want to quarrel first with Murray's contention that the praxis of historians can be comprehended in the analysis he advances of the natural sciences.

I have been hanging out with historians, as Murray has not, for the last three decades. This difference between us displays, no doubt, his good taste and my bad judgment. But it also leaves him writing about historians like a philosopher, not like a historian. Despite his profession of pragmatic naturalism—an interpretation of “the study of the past as it is actually practiced by historians” (293)—he practices nothing of the sort.

Take his treatment of the recent books by Jack Greene and David Hackett Fischer, *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Albion's Seed*. Murray claims that both books instance his insistence that good history rests upon causal theorizing. He concedes that the causal theorizing he attributes to the one of these works contradicts the causal theorizing he attributes to the other, but he assures us that the contradictions “can—and will—be settled by empirical research. [They] are

not matters of the scholars' values somehow distorting their vision, of 'prejudice' or 'alternative and incommensurable interpretations'" (287).

Greene's book appeared eight years ago, Fischer's seven. In 1996, the resolution of their contradictions has not even begun. The unconcern of historians for such resolution is revealing.

As Murray noted, Fischer promised a second volume that would extend his argument to Africa and African-Americans. At the time that he promised that second volume, and promised it "soon," many of his canniest colleagues predicted that such a book would cost Fischer dearly, regardless of the power of its argument, because it would be caught in the maelstrom of racial politics.

I do not say that Fischer has withheld the second volume on account of the political considerations that Murray dismisses. But I do observe that no one has ever mistaken Fischer for a fool, I do observe that seven years and counting is not soon, and I do observe that in the meantime Fischer has published another, very different book. *Paul Revere's Ride*, an unabashed narrative, has brought Fischer an acclaim among historians that *Albion's Seed* never approached. Where Murray insisted adamantly, on the evidence of such studies as *Albion's Seed*, that the revival of narrative was a mere fad and that "what is actually happening in the historical trade" is that "the narrative is being displaced by analyses of causal processes" (285), one of his own chosen exemplars among historians deliberately chose to produce the sort of story that Murray maintained was obsolescent in sophisticated strata of the profession.

The other of his own chosen exemplars, Jack Greene, has also published another book in the same interim. *The Intellectual Construction of America* is not a narrative, but it does not confront the contradictions between Greene's analysis and Fischer's that Murray assured us subsequent scholarship would, either. In fact, the most interesting contradictions it conjures are with its author's own earlier opus. *Intellectual Construction* seems willfully to resurrect the notion of American exceptionalism that *Pursuits of Happiness* buried. More than that, it abandons even the implicit causal interpretation that Murray manages to tease out of the earlier work and confines itself instead to a tantalizing descriptive taxonomy.

My point is that historians—even the best of them—do these sorts of things. They are not, as Murray would have them, human scientists. They play. They are, by scientific standards, intellectually irresponsible. They throw down theoretical gauntlets and then walk away from the empirical work that those theories entail. They are not obliged by the logic of their profession to pursue their dispute, and neither is anyone else.

In the years since their books appeared, the differences between Fischer and Greene have scarcely been acknowledged, let alone addressed. On the contrary, the differences between them echo and reinstate differences that go back more than a century, between the germ theorists whom Frederick Jackson Turner attacked and the social structuralists whom he represented. The differences between them have persisted for more than a century, and will recur perennially,

just because they *are* matters of “values” and “alternative and incommensurable interpretations,” manifest in the very materials with which the two men work. Greene cites virtually everything written in the quarter-century before his own account appeared, and virtually nothing written earlier than that. Fischer cites virtually nothing written in recent years and dredges up dozens upon dozens of works from the late nineteenth century. If the two men do not have different politics, different prejudices, and different presumptions, they do take different things seriously. They do talk past each other. And their “trade”—their discipline, such as it is—has neither the ability nor the will to settle their differences. When Murray concludes his discussion of Greene and Fischer by reaffirming his faith that “our method of studying the past is the hypothetico-deductive method, and theories about the past are not different in kind from those in other areas of science” (287), he takes historians far more seriously than they take themselves.

I want to quarrel as well with Murray’s argument against relativism, though I want to quarrel less elaborately on this score because he concedes all that I would claim. He grants that cultural variation in standards of truth “is a fact,” that there is no logical escape from such relativism, and that to ask for one is to ask “the wrong question” (315-6).

So far from seeking a refutation of such relativism, Murray seeks the conditions—the experience—that might induce people to give up the diverse, often contradictory and incommensurable criteria of truth that provide its foundation. He projects what seems to me a utopian fantasy in which the scientific outlook seduces people from all other cultural commitments by its superior power and adequacy.

On Murray’s imagining, science will ultimately seduce people not because it convinces them rationally—he concedes that, between science and other modes of meeting the world, there can be no rational convincement—but because it tempts them emotionally. Its triumphs in restoring health, prolonging life, providing food, and otherwise achieving unprecedented control over nature will elicit “a ‘motivational orientation’ superior to any other” (319) and thereby convert the world.

Murray moves, in short, from a theory of knowledge to a speculative anthropology of knowledge. He maintains—on no empirical evidence I can see—that people prefer one worldview to another on the basis of its capacity to satisfy their desires; and he holds—on an oddly one-sided canvass of the evidence—that the scientific standard of truth affords that satisfaction.

Science, he says, confers on its practitioners “a vastly greater control over nature . . . than any other system of ideas ever devised by man” (319). Though the superiority of the scientific system of ideas cannot be *demonstrated*, it is or will be *experienced* by peoples everywhere. The experience will induce belief, and the advance of the belief is “already . . . irreversible” (319). It must continue “until science becomes universal” (320). Such universality will not constitute a

refutation of relativism—*nothing*, Murray acknowledges, can constitute a refutation of relativism—but it will bring us to a point where relativism will simply “cease to be a problem” (320).

Murray’s faith in this prospect of human betterment seems to me as implausible and unpersuasive as it is touching. I do not see how he can conceive the world we owe to science and its attendant technologies as an irresistibly attractive one.

Even in the prosperous provinces of the West, where people have been the beneficiaries of the scientific persuasion, technological spectres from unemployment to annihilation haunt the waking thoughts of working men and women and the night dreads of their children. It is not for nothing that multitudes of Americans mistrust the assurances of the scientific establishment on fluoridation of their water, on UFOs, on AIDS. It is not for nothing, or an expression of invincible irrationality, that an overwhelming popular consensus has precluded construction of nuclear power plants for the past two decades.

Among the vast majorities of the world’s populations which have been unhinged by a Western imperialism that has commandeered the resources of the globe and consigned billions to blighted lives of inferiority, rage, and resentment—or, if you prefer, to tormented lives of ambition, avarice, and discontent—the bearers of scientific blessings come with dirty hands.

Everywhere, experiences of science are equivocal at best. And everywhere that equivocality informs people’s reluctance to give themselves wholly to science. Wherever science has advanced in the last few centuries—the only centuries in human history when it has advanced significantly and mattered materially—it has been attended by anxieties, rejections, and refusals, from *Frankenstein* to *Jurassic Park*, from the Luddites to the Greens.

I can’t see how science will ever elicit the universal assent that Murray assumes inevitable, because I can’t see how it will ever bring the unmitigated benefits that he fondly fantasizes. Nowhere in the world, even now, do people submit to science as he supposes they do. All around the globe there are fundamentalist resurgences that testify to its incompetence to satisfy even their material longings, let alone their spiritual hungers. In few places are those fundamentalist reversions more profound than in the United States, the place where people experience if any people do the best reasons to believe in the power and adequacy of science.

By the logic of Murray’s own professed empiricism—and, more, by what I always took to be his temper—I’d have thought him bound to heed these intimations of our tragic limitations. I am fascinated to find that he is so unimpressed by them, and I am even more fascinated to discover that I, of all people, am struck by them.

Murray Murphey always taught me by showing me other and more illuminating ways of coming at worlds I thought I knew. After all these years, he’s doing it still.

I recall hearing him say, more than once, that students should never take more than a course or two with a teacher, no matter how fine the teacher, because teachers said all they had to say in a course or two. In *Philosophical Foundations*, he holds that the historian's quest is ultimately for rule-governed, law-like explanations of behavior. In his own work, he proves that he is ultimately his own worst example: still going his own way, breaking all the rules, a law unto himself, for the rest of us to struggle to learn from.