

Scholarly Critique in the Twenty-First Century

Michael Scott Christofferson
Adelphi University

What is scholarly critique, and what are its purposes? At first glance, it seems obvious. A straight-forward, immediate answer can be found in the guidelines that *H-France* and other scholarly publications give their book review authors. *H-France* explains:

The most effective review will place the work within a broader context, explaining what important issues are worth the attention of scholars. Reviews should include a summary of the scope, purpose, and content of the work and its significance in the literature of the subject. Also, reviews should evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the work, paying attention to the use of sources, methodology, and argumentation in light of the work's stated purpose.

The American Historical Review says that it “expect[s] reviewers to write thoughtful and engaging critiques that explain the basic argument of a book, assess its strengths and weaknesses, and place the work in historiographical context.” Both *H-France* and *The American Historical Review* ask that reviews be written so as to be comprehensible to readers outside of the sub-field of the book reviewed. And both emphasize the individual reviewer's authorship of reviews. *The American Historical Review* explicitly states that it “do[es] not dictate the content of reviews.” *H-France* gives the review author final say on “substantive changes” proposed by its editors and asserts that reviews “represent... individual scholarly judgment.”¹ One might conclude from this that scholarly critique is on its most basic level an individual scholar's effort to elucidate and then evaluate a work's claims in relationship to what we already think we know about its topic. Although the book review guidelines for *H-France*, *The American Historical Review*, and other journals do not say it explicitly, scholarly critique in book reviews is a part of the peer review of scholarship that is essential to ensuring the integrity and progress of knowledge.

Similar in emphasis are the instructions given to American undergraduates when they are asked to write book reviews. For example, the “Guidelines for Writing a Book Review” in *A Student's Guide to History* explains that reviews must “state the author's topic and thesis” and “describe the evidence presented to support the thesis.” The evaluative tasks of scholarly critique and individual scholarly judgment are not really expected at this level. Students are asked to “assess the arguments and evidence used” only “if possible,” to “compare the work to related course materials” only “if required,” and to “close with your own assessment of the book's assumptions,

¹ Quotations from “H-France Book Review Guidelines,” last updated January 20, 2015, accessed June 24, 2015. <http://www.h-france.net/book-review-guidelines.html>; and “Book Reviewing in the AHR,” accessed June 24, 2015. <http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/american-historical-review/book-review-guide>.

arguments, and conclusions” only “if expected.”² If undergraduates are often neither expected nor required to evaluate scholarship it is because they lack the knowledge of the field or the experience with historical argumentation upon which a critique would be based. These issues are not unique to undergraduates. *The American Historical Review* explicitly excludes the uninitiated by requiring that its reviewers have a Ph.D. or its equivalent and have themselves authored a book-length monograph. Nevertheless, almost all book reviewers eventually find themselves reviewing a book on a topic in which they lack expertise. In such cases, it can be useful to fall back on the advice of *A Student's Guide to History*: at least summarize the book well! Indeed, reviewers would do well to start there; all too often scholarly critique skips this first and essential task of reviewing. In the case of reviews on *H-France Review*, which are not constrained by a word count, there is no excuse for not doing this.

But is this all there is to scholarly critique: an individual scholar's summary and evaluation of another scholar's work? No, of course not. Beyond the important role it plays in the progress of knowledge through peer review, scholarly critique serves a critical gate keeping and boundary policing function. It establishes which authors, discourses, methodologies, evidence, and truth claims are admissible within the profession. Book reviews and other forms of scholarly critique are discipline-defining activities as much as they are acts of individual cognition. This is an essential, yet rarely discussed, aspect of scholarly critique. We would benefit from addressing it more openly and explicitly.

Indeed, at important moments in the development of the historical profession book reviews were explicitly seen as playing a key discipline-defining role. In laying down the emerging standards of professional history in their *Introduction aux études historiques* of 1898, Charles-Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos celebrated the authors of critical book reviews that “parviennent [...] à défendre l'accès de leur profession aux incapables et aux faiseurs qui naguère y foisonnaient.” Their explicit role was to “créer une censure, et par conséquent, une justice, par la terreur, dans le domaine des études historiques.”³ Later, in criticizing these earlier “*méthodique*” historians, Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre saw book reviews as serving a “strategic function” in providing “them the opportunity to develop their own ideas by contrasting them to what was being published.” As André Burguière notes, “Far from considering reviews a bibliographical chore delegated to the goodwill of contributors, the directors of the *Annales* took on a large share of the work themselves” and were quite forthright in their evaluations.⁴ The role of book reviews in establishing professional standards and boundaries can also be seen in the case of American historians of France. For them, professional legitimacy was at least partially garnered through the positive reception of their work by the historical profession in France. Thus, when David Pinkney sought to evaluate whether American historians of France had achieved professional parity with French historians, he turned to book reviews for evidence, concluding in 1991 that increasingly favorable reviews of American historians' books by French historical journals indicated that American historians had arrived. Consequently, it was, he concluded, “time to

² Jules R. Benjamin *A Student's Guide to History*, 11th ed. (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010), 75.

³ Cited in Christian Delacroix, François Dosse, and Patrick Garcia, *Les Courants historiques en France: XIXe-XXe siècle*, édition revue et augmentée (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 133-34.

⁴ André Burguière, *The Annales School: An Intellectual History*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 15-16.

bury the Pinkney thesis” of 1958 that held that American historians of France should concentrate their efforts on works of synthesis since their monographs would inevitably be inferior to those of the French.⁵

The importance given to book reviews at these earlier moments in the profession’s development contrasts sharply with the workmanlike role they play among historians today. To be sure, we all rely on book reviews to learn about new scholarship, and they can make or break the scholarly reputations of the authors of the books reviewed. But they hardly seem discipline-defining, and their place in the academic reward system reflects this. Young scholars are encouraged to focus their efforts on publishing peer-reviewed scholarship without which their professional prospects are dim. In neither the highly competitive job market nor the struggle for tenure and promotion do book reviews count for much. The incentive structure of academia hardly encourages scholars to knock themselves out reviewing a book, especially when an honest review may do more harm than good to a scholar’s career prospects. One of the most capable young scholars I know essentially refuses to review books for fear of offending someone who might later be an external reviewer for tenure or a grant proposal. Senior scholars might be less subject to such fears, but habits gained at the beginning of a career are rarely shed later, especially when the incentive structure remains the same. The potential costs of a critical review are many and the potential benefits of putting long, hard work into reviewing are few. As a consequence, the culture of scholarly critique stagnates or atrophies, and book reviews cannot play the discipline-defining role that they once did. All of this is, of course, happening in a context in which the pace of publication makes it difficult for scholars to remain current in their field of specialization, much less their broader areas of expertise. Keeping up with the flood of publication requires that reading increasingly gives way to skimming. A sign of the times: one exceptionally fine book for undergraduates on writing history includes a chapter entitled “How to Read a Book without Ever Getting to Chapter One.”⁶ If only as a tool to help readers find their way through the many titles before them, book reviews are more necessary than ever, yet their status in the profession remains low.

If book reviews helped the *méthodiques* historians separate the professional “wheat” from the amateur “chaff” and the Annales school historians develop their alternative to the “positivistic” and “*événementielle*” history that preceded them, what discipline-defining role could they possibly play in a profession that is more fragmented than ever before?⁷ The answer lies in what

⁵ David H. Pinkney, “Time to Bury the Pinkney Thesis?” *French Historical Studies* 17:1 (1991): 219-23. For the original “Pinkney thesis” and Pinkney’s follow-up articles see “The Second Newberry Library Conference on French History,” *The Newberry Library Bulletin* 4:9 (1958): 281-301; David H. Pinkney, “The Dilemma of the American Historian of Modern France,” *French Historical Studies* 1:1 (1958): 11-25; David H. Pinkney, “The Dilemma of the American Historian of Modern France Reconsidered,” *French Historical Studies* 9:1 (1975): 170-81; and David H. Pinkney, “American Historians and the European Past,” *The American Historical Review* 86:1 (1981): 1-20.

⁶ Jim Cullen, *Essaying the Past: How to Read, Write and Think about History*, 2nd ed. (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 47.

⁷ For the American and French histories of this fragmentation see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), part 4, “Objectivity in Crisis;” and François Dosse, *New History in France: The Triumph of the Annales*, trans. Peter V. Conroy, Jr. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), part 3, “The Crumbling of History.” Dosse has updated

we share across historical fields and even to some extent across the humanities: the conditions of scholarly communication. Scholarly publication is in the midst of an immense transformation that both poses threats and offers opportunities. If we want this upheaval to advance scholarship, we need engage it, and there is no better way for the profession as a whole to do so than through scholarly critique.

The first of the shifts in scholarly publication is in the functioning of university presses. Originally created by universities to publish the scholarship of their own faculty, they initially served “as academic vanity presses,” according to former University of Michigan Press Director Phil Pochoda.⁸ From the late 1950s through the early 1970s they expanded their lists to include authors from outside of the press’s university and put in place peer review processes that remain with us today. During these glory years of the expansion of American higher education, university subsidies and purchases by well-funded libraries greased the wheels of university presses. The cutbacks of the 1970s resulted in declining subsidies and library purchases and initiated their long crisis, which continues today. In order to compensate for their growing losses on scholarly monographs and make ends meet, university presses turned to more profitable “mid-list” non-academic trade books. Many university presses moved, for example, into publishing books with a regional interest that the big commercial publishing houses found less attractive.

More recently—beginning in the 1990s, it seems—some administrators began treating university presses more like businesses than as part of the scholarly endeavor. Some universities have replaced subsidies with demands that presses become profit centers for the institution. Even the most august of university presses have adopted an increasingly commercial logic. Princeton University Press, has, according to André Schiffrin’s 1999 judgment, “despite its wealth—it is the best-endowed press in the country... been aggressive in trying to replace traditional monographs with commercially attractive books.”⁹ The inevitable result of this trend is that the most unprofitable publishing endeavors have been discontinued. For example, in the late 1990s Oxford University Press ceased publishing contemporary poetry, a decision that it defended by invoking its right to “a reasonable return.” This return included an average yearly payment of \$16 million in profits to Oxford University.¹⁰

The commercial calculus of university presses has shaped the content of what they publish, and this is mostly to the detriment of scholarship in French history. Longer monographs are too expensive and consequently much less publishable. In my case, as I explained earlier this year in a H-France listserv message, I was told by the director of a major American university press that my *French Intellectuals Against the Left*—which was ultimately published at a commercial press (Berghahn Books)—would have to be substantially cut for purely economic reasons before it

this analysis in his contribution to Delacroix, Dosse, and Garcia, *Les Courants historiques en France*, part 5, “Expansion et fragmentation: la ‘nouvelle histoire’.”

⁸ Phil Pochoda, “Universities Press On,” *The Nation*, December 29, 1997, 11-16, 12. The following thumbnail sketch of the history of university presses is largely drawn from this article.

⁹ Andre Schiffrin, “Payback Time: University Presses as Profit Centers,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 18, 1999, B4, accessed June 24, 2015. <http://chronicle.com/article/Payback-Time-University/2625/>

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

could be sent out to readers. The director wrote, “A book based on the present manuscript would have too high a retail price to reach the market that you [*sic*] have in mind, and we could not publish it successfully.”¹¹ According to Duke University Press editorial director Ken Wissoker, French history is “an area that almost never sells well” and as a consequence important scholarship in this area is, although not “less important,” “just less financially sustainable.”¹² This means, of course, that it is less publishable. If my general impression is correct, the evolution of Duke University Press’s list over the last few decades tends to confirm this. The decline of unprofitable French history scholarship on university press lists is disturbing enough, but what if the same dynamic led university presses to publish dubious scholarship because they anticipated that it would be at least modestly profitable? That would, of course, undermine more thoroughly the integrity of the scholarly endeavor, and it may already be happening. Although we as scholars mostly lack information about how presses make decisions on individual books, it is incumbent upon us to call university presses to task for publishing profoundly flawed scholarship, especially when it is also commercially successful. The scholarly community needs to make it clear to university presses that publishing dubious scholarship for commercial reasons violates their mission in a way that publishing non-scholarly trade books does not.¹³

A second shift in scholarly publication is only just beginning and is likely to result in far-reaching changes in scholarly communication. This is, of course, the digital revolution and related changes to all levels of the business of publication from production, to distribution, to marketing. On the production end, digital technology has, for example, enabled international collaboration between authors, the outsourcing of copyediting, and the mobilization of backlists that can be printed on demand. Changes to distribution include the demise of retail book chains such as Borders and the rise of Amazon as well as the emergence of digital books that can be downloaded in seconds. Digital technologies and the related advance of globalization has made American university presses players on an increasingly global stage, especially because more than 50 percent of world academics use English as their main work language. When nearly 40 percent of the libraries that buy subscriptions to Project MUSE journals are outside of the United States and universities are being built in the developing world at a record pace, it is clear where future sales lie. Like Hollywood—with which it shares more than one commonality as a producer of cultural goods—American university presses are increasingly molding their products with these markets in mind. Peter Dougherty, director of Princeton University Press, says, “even

¹¹ “University Presses and publishing in French history [more responses],” *H-France* listserv message of February 25, 2015.

¹² Adeline Koh, “On Open Access, #AltAc and the Future of the Academic Press: A Conversation with Duke University Press, Part Three,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 25, 2013, accessed June 24, 2015. http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/interview_dukeup_3/48841.

¹³ I sought to do as much in my lengthy review of Richard Wolin’s *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s*, which was published by Princeton University Press and selected, despite its profound flaws, as one of the eight best history books of 2012 by the *Financial Times*. Michael Scott Christofferson, “Maoism and the French Sixties,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 12:2 (2013): 195-204.

presses specializing in mainly American subject matter need to frame their books and shape their editorial programs in ways that enable their lists to travel well internationally.”¹⁴

Digital technologies have also enabled new forms of publication and ways of reading. Digital publication and the open access model of it are often advanced as a potential low-cost solution to the crisis of scholarly publication, but neither are necessarily cheaper than print publication. Peer review, copy editing, page layout, and the like still need to be done, and the funding for these tasks has to come from somewhere.¹⁵ Likewise, what digital publication saves on the cost of producing a physical book is not necessarily greater than the new costs incurred to ensure the permanence of digital publications by migrating them to new platforms and formats as old ones become outmoded.¹⁶ Because the digital revolution is changing the way people find information and read, it is also changing the structure of books. Wissoker asserts, “We’re starting to see that we need to have authors do chapter abstracts to accommodate the way people are using books when they are searching digitally across a collection of publications.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, university presses are ill-equipped to navigate the digital revolution. As both Wissoker and Pennsylvania State University Press director Patrick Alexander explain, it is hard for university presses to respond to the changing landscape of publishing because they lack the necessary resources. When your margins are thin and capital scarce a bad bet on new technology can be disastrous.¹⁸

When asked about the future of the monograph, MIT Press editorial director Gita Manaktala responded, “ultimately its fate is not in the hands of university presses, which have struggled to keep it alive in spite of declining readership. (Academic libraries have likewise struggled to support the monograph despite falling circulation.) The future depends on whether scholars themselves value the monograph enough to keep reading it. If so, funding models for monographs can and will be found.”¹⁹ Although Manaktala’s statement sounds a bit like passing the buck, it contains an essential grain of truth: university presses were created to serve

¹⁴ Peter J. Dougherty, “The Global University Press,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 23, 2012, accessed June 24, 2015, <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Global-University-Press/132927/>. This paragraph’s data on globalization comes from this article.

¹⁵ See the comments of Patrick Alexander, director of the Pennsylvania State University Press, in Adeline Koh, “Is Open Access a Moral or a Business Issue? A Conversation with The Pennsylvania State University Press,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 10, 2012, accessed June 24, 2015, <http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/is-open-access-a-moral-or-a-business-issue-a-conversation-with-the-pennsylvania-state-university-press/41267>.

¹⁶ According to Ken Wissoker in Adeline Koh, “Buying Book Chapters like Music Tracks, and What’s Wrong with Traditional Peer Review Anyway? A Conversation with Duke University Press, Part Two,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 17, 2013, accessed June 24, 2015, http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/interview_dukeup_2/48527.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; and Koh, “Is Open Access a Moral or a Business Issue?”

¹⁹ Adeline Koh, “What is the Future of Academic Publishing? An Interview with Gita Manaktala from MIT Press,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 17, 2012, accessed June 24, 2015, <http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/what-is-the-future-of-academic-publishing-an-interview-with-gita-manaktala-from-mit-press/41335>

scholarship and continue to define their mission accordingly.²⁰ Consequently, despite the industry's commercial and technological transformation, scholars should continue to have an important voice in what they do. Now, more than ever, university presses need to receive the input of scholars on crucial questions of scholarly publication. Yet we have, it appears, a tremendous reticence to discuss these issues openly. Witness the response to Karen Offen's February 2015 effort to spark a conversation on publishing in French history.²¹ Not only did few H-France subscribers choose to join the discussion, but H-France decided that it could not mention the name of the editor who demanded cuts from my manuscript for financial reasons unless I had that person's written permission. Apparently, one does not discuss how the sausage is made.

What would an open discussion of the conditions of production of scholarship entail, particularly in book reviews? First of all, it would require that we put much greater effort into our reviews and pay much more attention to issues of scholarly communication that are rarely discussed. Giving academics more credit for scholarly critique would help encourage this endeavor. As presses try out new publishing models and business models, we need to ask what impact they are having on quality. Are translations suffering because they simply cost too much to do properly? Is outsourced copyediting being done well? Are books suffering from insufficient evidence or holes in their argumentation as presses seek to limit their length? Do open source publications maintain the same standards as their predecessors? Are changes to publication formats that take advantage of the opportunities offered by digital technologies by, for example, allowing hyperlinking adding value to scholarship; and are changes made to accommodate new ways of reading (like the chapter summaries contemplated by Wissoker) an advance? These sorts of questions are, of course, difficult to address without insider knowledge of publishing, but if scholars were more willing to discuss how the academic sausage is made, we might know more. However it is to occur, academics need to engage in a systematic critique of the means of scholarly communication as they are transformed by new technologies and changes to higher education funding and administration. To properly do this, the purpose of the book review needs to be re-imagined. Although the primary focus should remain on summarizing and evaluating the book's argument, reviews need to consider books as products of the system of scholarly production and communication as a whole and not just authors.

Beyond considering the conditions of scholarly publication within book reviews, the scholarly community should also consider experimenting with new forms of scholarly critique that go beyond the focus on the individual book. Why not review publishers' lists or book series or journals for that matter? As new technologies developed for scholarly communication, they too need to be carefully reviewed. In so doing, scholarly critique would return to its discipline-defining roots to advance the profession in a new era of scholarly production and communication.

²⁰ The American Association of University Presses says in its mission statement that its "members strive to advance scholarship through their offerings." "AAUP's Mission," accessed June 24, 2015, <http://www.aaupnet.org/about-aaup>.

²¹ "University Presses and publishing French history [query]," *H-France* listserv message, February 21, 2015.

Scholars must monitor, discuss, and evaluate changes to scholarly publishing or risk being at their mercy. Forces beyond our control might indeed sweep away the scholarly monograph and even universities as we know it regardless of our actions, but the scholarly enterprise will almost certainly suffer if we don't actively engage the changes before us. Scholarly critique must adapt to address the changing conditions of scholarly communication.

Michael Scott Christofferson
Adelphi University
mchristofferson@adelphi.edu

Copyright © 2015 by the H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Salon nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Salon
Volume 7 (2015), Issue 20, #4
ISBN 2150-4873