

H-France Review Vol. 7 (October 2007), No. 121

Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice*. With contributions by Steven Shepard and Phillip Honenberger. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. xvi + 288 pp. Tables, notes, index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-51829-9; \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-226-51830-5.

“Allan Megill and the Labors of Historical Epistemology”
Review by John L. Harvey, St. Cloud State University.

Webster’s *New World Collegiate Dictionary* defines “to guide” as the act of pointing the way, or directing; it also can mean to manage or to regulate an object.[1] The intellectual historian Allan Megill of the University of Virginia has now produced one such prescription for the practice of history, aimed at both students and his professional peers. Megill believes that the discipline’s younger travelers in particular have fallen sway to the seductive Sirens of an “anti-epistemology,” which is often “obtained...by default from Michael Foucault.” He argues that today’s historians blithely accept that “knowledge is but a manifestation of power” and thus pursue historical research as “a mode of propaganda” according to political-ideological agendas. Works published in even the most prestigious venues tend to prioritize open-ended claims, in support of the present within schools and general society, before a commitment to careful argument and evidence. For Megill, these didactic goals can produce popularized and commercialized propaganda, led by “cheerleaders” with Ph.D.s that abjure the “rules of epistemology” which are still respected by the “true historians” who are sentinels of the guild. In response to this professional misconduct, Professor Megill has gathered ten of his essays from the past two decades into a manual that will direct—or regulate?—the rules for an “honest” journey along a normative path of historical knowledge.[2] The essays are to acquaint students with contemporary challenges of improper methodology or epistemology, to be overcome like the (more numerous) labors of Hercules.

Works that delineate proper historical method have been with the discipline since the nineteenth century. But they are still difficult to evaluate. Setting aside the accuracy of specific examples cited by their authors, theoretical treatises tend to rely on an internal logic of argument. Their persuasiveness depends on one’s reception to their logic or their rhetoric, rather than an autonomous evidence base or a coherent research field which is external to the argument in question. Points of affirmation and skepticism really can reflect personal dispositions to be accepted or dismissed merely on their own terms. With this in mind, I want to present the crux of Megill’s positions as they range across his principal chapters. As this review is for specialists of France, it will emphasize Megill’s treatment of Parisian traditions of historical practice, particularly in regards to the *Annales* tradition. I will conclude with a few general questions about the cohesion of Megill’s guide, in light of its separate essays of varied length and sophistication. Is it a convincing guide or tool, especially for use in student instruction?

Megill’s overriding purpose is to defend the expectation that historians present their arguments in a clear way, whereby rigorous evidence and consistent argument support claims of interpretation. This “honest” history is threatened by a range of epistemological relativisms, the first of which is a conflation between historical knowledge and tides of social memory that he treats in part one of his text.[3] To be sure, problems of history and memory have preoccupied academic historians and social scientists since the era of Frances Yates and Maurice Halbwachs.[4] But Megill believes that historical writing faces a relatively new challenge from social groups that affirm cultural values with an uncritical gloss on past

achievements, often in form of public commemoration. Memory takes on a “double positive.” Oral testimonies become sacralized for their own sake and tropes of imperfect memory are reified into civic meaning that annihilates space between the past on its own terms and a consensual valuation of presentist norms. “History” is thus reduced to “memory-oriented, affirmative historiography” that discounts evidence or argument deemed unsuited to the present.

Megill contends instead that “true history stands almost in opposition to memory” (p. 18). To protect their epistemological integrity, scholars must stand distant from the past, in which memory (individual or social) surrenders exclusive interpretative rights. Historians should insist on a critical appreciation where the past is removed from contemporary concerns or conditions. Research should surprise and discomfort the historian who treats social memory as the “other” of history, even if evidence of memory of course can inform some partial knowledge of the past. Drawing on Michel de Certeau, he presses historians to distinguish between recollections of the past and evidence that suggests a different reality of their experience (pp. 38-39). Megill is essentially asking for history to adopt a degree of autonomy from public service and, especially, of the identity politics that seem to identify our culture today.[5] Students must learn to contextualize memory with contending evidence and to acknowledge the diversity of interpretation that comes from a relative autonomy from individual identities or social norms.

Having navigated around memory’s shoals, young Argonauts in pursuit of a “true history” must contend next with the “seductive power” of written narratives.[6] Hidden within the narrative is a form of cognitive value. It is based on the conceptual attraction of the “good story,” one that infuses a possible interpretation of the past into an actual, definitive account—something like that famous “fish that got away.” The narrative does this by introducing an aesthetic force of communication. It invests the author with a cultural power of sympathy for subjects that may be marginalized in more structural approaches of historiography. The narrative thus offers an intellectual clarity of causation, just as it invites dissatisfaction with its depth of explanatory value. (pp. 64-66) All of this give rise to a potential “romanticization of memory” that communicates privileged accounts, even gossip, of the past (p. 72). Uncritical sympathies evolve into universalizing accounts. While lending credence to this scope of criticism, Megill still emphasizes the durability of narrative as a convincing means to explain the past. If it cannot be eliminated, like the Hind of Ceryneia it can be tamed by “processes of argumentation and proof by which we test and refine historical and other claims” (p. 77). We are not told what these processes are to be.

Megill continues to analyze the narrative by arguing that its means of recounting past events are inherently bound to an “explanation” of causation that link the chronology of components into an understandable story. Explanation thus presented unfortunately can result in both a “prejudice of universality” (the cause of one issue has predictive power for other occurrences) and a “hermeneutic naïveté” that assumes away any potential for interpretative bias (p. 83). Megill quickly dispatches any support for universalizing interpretations with well-known criticism of positive logic in the humanities. But to argue against hermeneutic naïveté, he critiques the use of description and explanation from the *Annales* program, symbolized famously by Fernand Braudel’s “timeless” classic *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II*. Braudel and Lucien Febvre believed that this model of “geohistory” represented the penultimate succession of the analytical “histoire problème” over conventional, empirical narrative.[7] Megill, however, echoes long-held American assertions that Braudel’s masterpiece failed to meet this standard, as it never integrated its enormous data set into a coherent “problem.”[8] It is instead a narrative of “totalizing aspirations” because of its “piling up” of erudition and its focus on “existents” that entail a “vast collection of characters,” the leading of which is the great sea itself (pp. 92-95). By implication, Megill seems to suggest that the tradition of grand structural studies completed at the height of the *Annales* movement were in fact narratives of “recounting.” They falsely assumed a scientific objectivity based on its “problem-oriented” approach and the neutrality of interdisciplinary teamwork. Recognizing the nature of the narrative in the *Annales*,

Megill asks that critical readers distinguish between “recountings” and explanation by understanding their interrelation and the interpretative values that guide them.

Empowered by an appreciation for narrative’s epistemological dangers, students are led to encounter “objectivity and speculation” as the third test for a true epistemology. In a post-postmodern climate, is objectivity a *passé* noble dream? Professor Megill accepts that absolute objectivity is a mythology, a mythical Golden Fleece for younger students of history. But Megill will not surrender to a history where *tout est permis*. Echoing Thomas Haskell, he believes that even if perfect neutrality is impossible, historical method should not be arbitrary. Scholars must conform to accepted standards of evidence and choose perspectives with “some measure of detachment” (p. 109).^[9] The inevitable “angular history,” written with a commitment to personal values, is inevitable and acceptable, if grounded in some level of objectivity. It is up to the historian to follow a “balancing act” between these two apparently incompatible ideals, akin to a historian “walking a high wire” (p. 111). Although he suggests no formula for leveling these scales, Megill lays out four categories of objectivity (dialectical, absolute, disciplinary, and procedural) as a framework for discussing the possibility of a dispassionate history.

Megill also suggests that counterfactual analysis and speculation, posed perhaps as hypotheses, have a clear utility, if it is done “honestly and intelligently” (p. 124). Here the author seems more concerned with writings, such as a study on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, that insinuate claims based on deceptive inference, rather than consistent treatment of primary source evidence.^[10] A rigorous questioning of evidence can be assisted, he concludes, with counter-factual postulates, as presented in the edited work of Niall Ferguson on “virtual history.”^[11] If students avoid speculating on simplistic “might-have-beens” in history, then transparent, limited, and consistent counterfactual reasoning can demonstrate the inadequacy of “regularity” (such as laws or immobile history) and show the complexity of causal analysis, as opposed to simply “scientific” description of facts (pp. 128-131). This entire third section is perhaps the least rigorous section of Megill’s tome. Rather than a precise position regarding objectivity and inference, the reader is left with rather uncontroversial and vague observation that we must accept “degrees of certainty.” We are told that historians will merely decide as individuals what account or evidence is best, based on a discipline of open choice, with adherence to analytical norms described elsewhere in the book.

Megill’s defense of a pluralistic historiography and sound epistemology brings us to the final labors, dealing with the disciplines recent “fragmentation” and what the author contends is a current reactionary search for new paradigms of “recoherentization.” Here Megill aims at leading progressive tendencies in Western history from the last fifty years, particularly the institutional block of the *Annales*, and the politically-infused drive of the New Cultural History. Again, we encounter four “levels” of conceptual coherence: the narrative, the master narrative (a total segment of history, like the story of the U.S.), the grand narrative (the tradition of William McNeil or Toynbee); and meta-narrative (centered on the immanent, such as God). All are defended by claims of objectivity and “search for coherence” that often build borders of communal priorities either among historians or between disciplines. To conceptualize this further, Megill dips again into four “ideal-typical attitudes” towards the unity of knowledge in the discipline.^[12] To resist pressures of conformity, scholars have moved to study the margins that are most unrelated to central integral “trunks” of historiography. With sympathy for Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream*, Megill accepts the demise of grand narratives and claims for the “full story.” We are a profession that faces a future of diversities and competing identities (pp. 161, 180-181).

Megill’s main focus in this section is against hegemonic “new” histories that claim a unitary coherence to scholarship. His primary target again is the postwar *Annales* movement, from Febvre to Furet. Their admittedly bygone quest for a “unified history of mankind,” built by team research and social science interdisciplinarity, assumed that historians could converge on coordinated investigations of problems under institutional direction of the EHESS.^[13] Their actual ideals, however, were not “guided by

logic,” according to Megill, but by a “war against enemies” against supposed traditions of unreflective empiricism that they defined through the oppositional programmatic essays and book reviews of Febvre, Braudel, and their acolytes.[14] As such, Megill presents the *Annales* as a rather uncompromising, even dogmatic monolith. This movement, which was always highly centralized to the French national tradition, has of course disintegrated into a multitude of methods and foci since the 1970s. But like the Hyrda, the end of one form of “closed” history” results in its replacement with another “grab for academic power.” Megill is especially suspicious of those seeking a “paradigm” status, because such “orthodoxies” usually lack a real epistemological justification behind their promises of methodological advancement over other forms of history (p. 188). This problem is explained through the “paradigmatic” claims of the New Cultural History, whose political motives have resulted in implicit claims for a legitimate “authorized history,” such as rigid dogma in some feminist scholarship (p. 183). For Megill, these self-serving agendas can lead to ruinous epistemological compromises, as arose in Michael Bellesiles’ *Arming America* (pp. 265-266).

Because this book is a manual of theory, readers must gauge its persuasiveness for themselves. Many of the conclusions strike this reviewer (subjectively) as pragmatic and even, to an extent, rather conventional calls for a historiography that is engaged with the present, but attuned to moderate goals of epistemology. As suggested above, however, Megill is better at noting “fallacies” than identifying positively what a “true” epistemology would be, beyond some rather platitudinarian sketches or vulnerable targets.[15] Who after all can oppose bland calls for careful uses of evidence and clarity in argument, or to maintain an open and pluralistic profession? And how would Professor Megill relate his ideals on the writing of history to its teaching? It is an often overlooked component of our discipline, where we perhaps have the most public influence, and yet where pressures for drawing lessons and preaching conformity are truly the greatest.

Finally, I personally found the book as a whole less than the sum of its parts. Full-scale research articles are grouped with short book reviews, leaving it uneven in content (see his own warning, p. xiv). Although the writing is quite limpid, often with enthralling analogies, the ideas tend to fall into the self-contained units of the essays. More analytical bridging was needed to span individual arguments or to gain greater depth on points otherwise left opaque. Rather than a new twelve page introduction, a “contemporary guide to practice” needed perhaps the more consistent teasing of the core themes, requiring in the end more than just the collection of essays. Nevertheless, scholars at all levels of experience may wish to access this book for its individual pieces, particularly on the narrative or objectivity. It does offer interesting pieces of a treasure map, which sometimes may be more fun than an entire guide by itself.

NOTES

[1] My version of Webster’s *New World Collegiate Dictionary*, Second College Edition (New York, 1984).

[2] Quoted words and phrases from this paragraph are from Megill’s introduction, “The Need for Historical Epistemology,” *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error*, pp. 2, 5, 12-14.

[3] Megill’s numerous matrices, typologies, and categories all tend to analyze in quadruples – perhaps a subconscious character evident as far back as his four-subject study, *Prophets of Extremity*. Among the first examples are the outcomes that result from the implosion of great national master narratives (such as an American “city on the hill”). He suggests that citizens either a) ignore history as useless without a

meta-narrative; b) retreat blindly to interest-group traditions; c) embrace a nostalgic “aesthesis of history” that celebrates the old objects as uncritical representatives for a broader “lost” past that must be protected – as in historical preservation movements; d) or reduce history to commemoration. See Megill, pp. 31-36.

[4] History and memory have been the grist for numerous strands of debate regarding methodology of oral history, the study of public monuments and communal actions, and the role of museums or sites of public history. Although the list of works is enormous, aside from the content of the review *History and Memory* since 1989, see the explosion in the early 1990s on the subject, such as the American-oriented works of Paula Rabinowitz, “Wreckage upon Wreckage: History, Documentary and the Ruins of Memory” in *History and Theory* 32 (1993): 119-137 and the collection of essays from the *Journal of American History* edited by David Thelen in *Memory and American History* (Bloomington, 1990). French historians may consult Pierre Nora’s famous *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Paris, 1984-1992); Jacques Le Goff’s translated essays in *History and Memory* (New Haven, 1992); Patrick Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Burlington, 1993); Robert Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven, 1994); Daniel Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago, 1999); Avner Ben-Amos, *Funerals, Politics and Memory in Modern France 1789-1996* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2000. A notable thoughtpiece on methods for gender, memory and history is Luisa Passerini, “A Memory for Women’s History: Problems of Method and Interpretation,” in *Social Science History* 16 (1992): 669-692.

[5] Prominent scholars from Europe have also suspected the impact of memory and history in explaining why historians and societies in European democratic states remained silent on the Holocaust or Vichy after 1945. See especially Henry Rousso’s, *The Haunting Past: History, Memory, and Justice in Contemporary France* (Philadelphia, 2002) and Saul Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington, 1993).

[6] Megill employs the work “truthful” not to mean “true in any absolute sense, but [to mean] ‘justified,’ by a mode of justification appropriate to history. The alternative to the view that history is truthful narrative is one form or another of history-as-propaganda.” Megill, p. 11. Readers may ask, however, what exactly is the correct “mode of justification appropriate to history,” as Megill does not elaborate.

[7] Guy Massicotte, *L’histoire problème. La méthode de Lucien Febvre* (St. Hyacinthe. Quebec, 1981). Compare this to Michael Kammen, “An Americanist’s Reprise: The Pervasive Role of *histoire problème* in Historical Scholarship Concerning the United States Since the 1960s,” *Reviews in American History* 26 (1998): esp. 1-5.

[8] See John A. Marino, “The Exile and His Kingdom: The Reception of Braudel’s Mediterranean,” *Journal of Modern History* 76 (2004): 627-635. Although Megill relies heavily on the assertion of Bernard Bailyn that Braudel failed to connect his three analytical layers of time, historians have not agreed that this was either essential for the book or that it nullified other important themes, such as the shifting economic dominance of Northern Europe over the Mediterranean during the sixteenth century. See as bookend examples Melvin M. Knight, “The Geohistory of Fernand Braudel,” *Economic History Review* 10 (1950): 212-215 and Jacques Revel’s introduction to *Fernand Braudel et l’histoire* (Paris, 1999), 11-15.

[9] Thomas Haskell, “Objectivity is not Neutrality: Rhetoric and Practice in Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream*,” which first appeared in *History and Theory* 29 (1990): 129-157.

[10] He offers the work of Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville, 1993) as a positive example of how historians can infer conclusions from partial or inconsistent evidence. The counterpart example of “improper” inference is a University of Virginia student, Joshua D. Rothman, who completed a thesis in 2003 “Notorious in the Neighborhood:

Sex and Families across the Colon Line in Virginia, 1787-1861." His results and arguments were published as "James Callender and Social Knowledge of Interracial Sex in Antebellum Virginia," in *Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory, and Civic Culture* (Charlottesville, 1999).

[11] Niall Ferguson, ed. *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (New York, 1999).

[12] Either 1) we have it now; 2) we may eventually built toward it; 3) it is an unreachable ideal, but we must still pursue in a discipline made autonomous and coherent by its common method, or 4) it is unreachable, so we can "de-discipline" history by borrowing from methods exterior to it.

[13] On the long commitment of Febvre to directed research, and its contradictions from the interwar period, see the reviewer's "An American *Annales*? The *Revue internationale d'histoire économique* of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre," *Journal of Modern History* 76 (2004): 528-621 and the introduction to "Le «Annales» e la storia comparata. Corrispondenza inedita di Marc Bloch and Kan'ichi Asakawa, 1929-1935," *Passato e Presente* 71 (2007): 69-76.

[14] Here however Megill perhaps did not appreciate the degree to which Bloch, Febvre, and Braudel also voiced their most famous programmatic statements as an effort to renew history in the wake of the great crises of society (and the profession) during the twentieth century. See on this Lutz Raphael, "The Idea and Practice of World Historiography in France: The *Annales* Legacy," in *Writing World History, 1800-2000*, eds. B. Stuchtey and E. Fuchs (London, 2003): 155-171; Neil Morpeth, "Marc Bloch, Strange Defeat, The Historian's Craft and World War II: Writing and Teaching Contemporary History," *The European Legacy* 10 (2005): 179-195; Jean-Pierre Aguet, "Un «Combat pour l'histoire»: Lucien Febvre et l'histoire diplomatique," *L'historien et les relations internationales*. Geneva: I.U.H.E.I.: (1990): 3-24; Jonathan Dewald, "Lost Worlds: French Historians and the Construction of Modernity," *French History* 14 (2000): 438-440; and the contributions to the *Cahiers Jean Jaurès* 163/164 (2002) that discussed Febvre's greatest project for a unified, total science--the *Encyclopédie française*.

[14] With due respect to a far more senior historian, I cannot help but ask whether the *Annales* is really still a straw man worth attacking in 2007, especially for students unfamiliar even with Foucault, even as a means of getting at the New Cultural History? And although Dr. Joshua Rothman must defend his own scholarship, should a full professor at UVA really focus key sections of a chapter, written in 2005, on a student thesis done in his department from 2003? Are these really the toughest targets today?

John L. Harvey St. Cloud State University jlharvey@stcloudstate.edu

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (October 2007), No. 121

ISSN 1553-9172