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ABSTRACT

The intellectual changes of the 19th century were as dramatic as the economic changes of the Industrial Revolution. U.S. citizens at that time subscribed to the traditional belief that a spiritual self, grafted onto the body, was the source of life and thought. The later belief that human beings possessed complete, experiential knowledge of their own thoughts was a profound departure from the view that the mind possessed many different abilities. Faith in the immediate availability of self-knowledge supported the northern middle class emphasis on self-control as well as the cult of the self-made man. Despite the enormous confidence in self-perception in the early 19th century, some eventually found reason to doubt the "evidence of consciousness," and a part of the intellectual establishment became committed to the concept of unconscious thought. The work of social and cultural historians in our time has suffered by its confinement within the late 19th-century model of mind as divided between conscious and unconscious experience. A discussion of the works of Herbert Gutman, Paul Faler, Paul Johnson, and Mary Ryan is included. The dearth of synthesis in recent historical studies may be due to the difficulty of relating the wealth of discrete research data. But as long as history is conceived of as a local phenomenon experienced in the self, data synthesis will be difficult. By considering history not as resistance to experience but as interpretation of signs we may recognize that history itself is a synthetic process. (PPB)

Semiotic and Society in Nineteenth-Century America

by

James Hoopes

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This paper has two major points. First, semiotic was created in nineteenth-century America as a radical alternative to the more conventional notion of thought as conscious or unconscious experience. Second, a semiotic approach to nineteenth-century society would improve our historical understanding.

Both socially and intellectually, the United States underwent enormous change in the nineteenth century.

Among the myriad social changes, the most basic included the quantum leap in methods of exchange and production familiarly labeled the industrial revolution.

The intellectual changes were equally dramatic but not so well understood. Notions of what a human being is and how a person thinks are basic conceptions in any society. Nineteenth-century Americans subscribed overwhelmingly to the traditional belief that a spiritual soul, grafted onto the body, was the source of life and thought. But during the nineteenth century American thinkers greatly changed their notion of how the soul thinks. And a few abandoned the notion that the soul creates thought in favor of the view that thought creates the self.

By the early nineteenth century, American philosophy of mind was firmly committed to the consciousness concept or "way of ideas" that had been the avant-garde movement of Western philosophy two centuries earlier. According to the consciousness concept, thinking was a process of internal experience that resembled external bodily sensation.

External experience caused the body to deliver sensations to the brain which were represented, in the form of ideas, within the mind or soul. The body sensed objects; the mind perceived ideas. John Locke, the most influential English advocate of this psychology, made clear his conception of thought as internal experience when he wrote that it was only because he had reserved the term "sensation" for external experience that he called the mind's perception of its own cperations "Reflection" which "though it be not Sense...yet it is very like it, and might properly enough be called internal Sense."[1]

This notion of thought as internal experience eventually created tremendous confidence in human self-knowledge. The tendency is evident in Locke himself who ridiculed Descartes' belief that the soul always thinks with the objection that since the mind is not always conscious, it could not always think unless it sometimes thought unconsciously. And unconscious thought was a notion as unreasonable, Locke believed, as saying "That a man is always hungry, but that he does not always feel it."2 Just as hunger consisted of the knowledge that one was hungry, thinking consisted of the knowledge that one was thinking and, by extension, what one was thinking.

The belief that human beings possessed complete, experiential knowledge of their own thoughts was a profound departure from the millenia-old faculty psychology, according to which the mind possessed many different

abilities, including understanding and willing. The belief that understanding and willing were two qualitatively different ways of thinking had been used to explain conflict within the self, especially conscience of sin: "I see and approve the better course; I follow the worse."[3] According to this traditional psychology human beings did not possess complete self-knowledge, for there were aspects of thought, especially its moral quality, that were not self-evident to "understanding" and therefore required not merely observation but arduous interpretation for a human being to achieve what self-knowledge was possible. This skeptical view of humanity's potential for self-knowledge was challenged by the consciousness concept with its confident assertion that the mind directly experienced its ideas.

The consciousness concept's description of thinking as immediate experience within the mind was predominant in the United States by the Jacksonian era when it helped to inspire the individualist ethos, laissez-faire economic theory, and belief in free will that characterized the period. Faith in the immediate availability of self-knowledge supported the northern middle class emphasis on self-control as well as the cult of the self-made man. The therapeutic use of silence, solitary confinement, and other "moral" therapies in asylums and penitentiaries had a theoretical foundation in the belief that relieving the physically deranged brain of external sensory distractions would permit the mind to engage in "self-improvement."[4]

Shaming and humiliation of children were replaced by gentler moral instruction at least partly because of new confidence in the child's capacity for introspection, self-analysis and voluntary improvement.[5] So, too, did the increasing recognition that slavery was an abhorrent moral evil depend partly on the widely accepted nineteenth-century belief that the old doctrine of divine determinism had been disproved by the "evidence...of our consciousness" for free will.[6] That is, since people felt free in their actions, they were free, for the consciousness concept assured them of the accuracy of their self-perception. By what right, then, did one human being deprive another of the free will that even God did not enslave?[7] Many other humanitarian reforms, including feminism, were similarly reliant on the consciousness concept. Confidence that human beings undeniably and directly observed free will at work within themselves led to profound changes in mainstream religiosity, including especially the encouragement of self-interested effort in conversion by aggressive revivalists such as Lyman Beecher and Charles G. Finney.[8] Protestant fundamentalism became less than formerly a religion of pious doubt and uncertain self-interpretation; the new fashion was blazing moments of "religious experience."

Despite the enormous confidence in self-perception in the early nineteenth century, some Americans eventually found reason to doubt the "evidence of consciousness." Some clergy were distressed that the consciousness concept so

emboldened faith in human moral ability that it threatened the older theological doctrines of human depravity and divine sovereignty.[9] Pioneer forensic psychiatrists in the mid nineteenth century were becoming convinced of the existence of emotional disorders and impulsive criminality that contradicted the emphasis on self-control in the consciousness concept.[10] Other physicians became doubtful of free will and self-control on the basis of clinical encounters with aboulia, amnesia, split personality and other mental disorders.[11] Some Darwinists, genetic psychologists, and espousers of scientific determinism questioned free will.[12] Advocates of animal magnetism, phrenologists, mind curists, and respectable neurologists all cast doubts on the optimistic sunbeams of the mainstream clerics, philosophers, and physicians who espoused self-control.[13] For all those reasons, by the end of the nineteenth century, the consciousness concept had lost its stranglehold on American philosophy of mind, and a significant part of the intellectual establishment had become committed to the notion that there was such a thing as unconscious thought.

Twentieth-century cultural and intellectual historians have considered the concept of unconscious thought as one of the fundamentally radical and innovative concepts that created and characterizes the "modern" era. But I argue in a forthcoming book that the division of thought into conscious and unconscious was a conservative compromise

aimed at preserving the view that thought was experience and also the Victorian ideal of conscious self-control. The compromise worked. Progressive liberals in the early twentieth century were drawn to Freudianism by what they saw as its emphasis, not on the unconscious, but on consciousness. Walter Lippmann defined mastery as "the substitution of conscious intention for unconscious striving."[14]

The conservative strategy of dividing thought into conscious or unconscious experience helped to fend off a far greater threat to traditional conceptions of the self, the notion in semiotic that all thought is unconscious, that no thought is conscious in the sense of the seventeenth-century consciousness concept. That is, no thought is immediately experienced within the self. All thought is in external signs. The mind has no experiential knowledge of thoughts but learns their meaning by interpreting signs. Indeed, the concept of the self is, itself, just such an interpretation so that semiotic points to the conclusion that the self or soul does not create thought; thought creates the self.

This semiotic notion of the self as the creation rather than the creator of thought was one of the most radical intellectual developments in nineteenth century American history. Its seeds lay in the enormous confidence placed in reason by eighteenth and early nineteenth-century theological liberals, whose positive faith in human thought was inspired at least partly by Locke and other advocates of

the consciousness concept. Emerson and Thoreau surpassed the Unitarian admiration for reason and aspired to transcend the human self through thought. William James and John Dewey followed with their pragmatic doubt of the existence of the traditional atomistic individual of Western culture; they considered the self a social construction.[15] The nineteenth-century zenith of this trend was the semiotic realism of Charles Sanders Peirce, who viewed all thought, not as internal experience, but as inferential interpretation of signs. Peirce held that the self itself was a sign, for "When we think, then, we our selves, as we are at that moment, appear as a sign."[16]

Peirce's homegrown, American semiotic is more useful than the now fashionable, imported deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida. Derrida's deconstructionism is based on the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure who is often called the inventor of the science of signs, though Peirce preceded him by thirty years. Derrida has developed Saussure's emphasis on the arbitrariness of verbal symbols into an argument for the arbitrariness of history, in which there is no necessary connection between one thing and the next so that "In a certain sense, 'thought' means nothing."[17] Peirce's semiotic is considerably broader and more conservative because he was a logician. His views were based not only on language but also on the process of thought. While Peirce conceded that many signs are arbitrary he insisted that many others are not. There is a

real relation between a weathercock and the wind. Also, Peirce, interested in logic as well as language, did not stop where Saussure did at the relationship between the object and its sign but added a third element to the signifying process, the "interpretant" or thought to which the sign gives rise.[18] Many signs have an arbitrary relation to their objects but are not arbitrarily interpreted. A stop sign's octagonal shape may be an arbitrary convention, but a driver who arbitrarily interpreted the sign to mean "Floor it!" would put himself at real risk. It is Peirce's demonstration that the relation between many signs are logical and real, not arbitrary, that makes his semiotic far more constructive and useful than Derrida's to the historian interested in following the logic of change over time.

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In the balance of this paper I will discuss a few relatively recent works of social and cultural history in order to suggest how, as it seems to me, our understanding of the past might be improved by a semiotic approach. These are worthy studies that have richly added to our understanding of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the work of social and cultural historians in our time has suffered by its confinement within the conservative, late nineteenth-century model of mind as divided between conscious and unconscious experience. We would do well to replace this conservative model with a semiotic point of

view in which thoughts are not presumed to be immediately experienced but are known by interpretation of signs.

The mainstream model of thought as immediate experience within a self is one basis of social historians' preference for local studies. A leading proponent of this approach, albeit for the colonial era, has explained that if communities are composed of atomistic selves, each capable of its own "local experience," then "the 'little community' appears as the single most apposite unit of study. Within narrow and wholly familiar bounds...did the vast majority of colonial Americans encounter the forces which shaped their lives."[19] Two implicit assumptions in that passage are worth remarking. First, the object of historical study is assumed to be the "experience" of past people more than the origin and development of historical "forces." The second, related assumption is that people are more or less passive in history. Within the local community people "experience" or "encounter" rather than create the "forces that shape their lives." This notion of human passivity in the face of "experience" is not peculiar to social historians but is an often noted feature of the model of thought as experience.

The model of thought as experience within a self also underlies the culture-society dichotomy that informs much of the social history written in the last twenty years. The late Herbert Gutman, trying to avoid "crude behavioral social history," guided younger scholars to the anthropological concept of culture as "a kind of resource"

that is used in the social "arena." Gutman wanted to show that working people had not been intellectually disempowered by the industrial revolution. They had an intellectual arsenal, even in their traditional cultural values, that allowed them to shape as well as be shaped by the industrial revolution. He quoted the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman to the effect that culture and society must be analyzed discretely, for "Human behavior...is invariably the resultant of two factors: the cognitive systems...on the one hand, and the system of real contingencies as defined by the social structure on the other."[20] At bottom, however, this approach differed little from the traditional epistemology of the consciousness concept in which thought was passive experience or at best a response to the external environment. There was little doubt as to which would prevail when culture or the "cognitive system" clashed with the "real contingencies as defined by the social structure."

Gutman's culture-society dichotomy, combined with the "little community" approach pioneered by colonial historians, informed many of the 1980's books about industrializing communities, including Paul Faler's model study of the Lynn shoemakers.[21] Faler aimed at showing how "journeymen cordwainers applied to their present condition ideas, values, standards, and expectations inherited from the past" and thus produced a class conscious ideology "for conceiving an alternative social system."[22] Thus, where the commercial towns of eastern Massachusetts rejected

Methodism, industrial Lynn self-consciously embraced it as a way of rejecting the Congregationalist emphases on election and predestination "which paralleled in a manner discernible to the mechanics a class structure that was becoming increasingly intolerable."[23] But Faler recognized that Methodism was also related to the workers' embrace of bourgeois values. The Methodist emphasis on free will translated easily into the ideals of self-control, hard work, frugality, and temperance that were supportive of industrialization and modernization. Faler therefore saw the new religiosity as not only a class conscious rejection of Congregationalism but also as a result of "the quickening of economic activity."[24] The shoemakers thus seem to have been moved partly by something beyond their ken, for they often participated enthusiastically in the religious and cultural changes subordinating their class: "it would be erroneous to view industrial morality solely as a bourgeois or middle class way of life that was imposed on the rest of society....there seems to be a logic in the early stages of industrialization that compels compliance."[25] One thus sees how the model of thought as conscious-versus-unconscious experience has become, even when there is no explicit employment of Freudian methodology, an explanatory device much relied on by historians.

Other social historians, guided by the model of thought as conscious or unconscious experience, have also tended to discount nineteenth-century workers' religion, viewing it as

a conscious rationalization of deeper, unconscious forces. The early nineteenth-century revivals in Rochester, New York, according to Paul Johnson, legitimized "a particular historical form of domination....A significant minority of workingmen participated willingly in that process. And that, of course, is the most total and effective social control of all."[26] Mary Ryan's study of Utica disputes Johnson's conclusion by subordinating social class to family structure as the locus of the threat posed by industrialism. But she agrees that workers' religiosity is not to be accepted at face value: "The men and women of Oneida County...did not express their family concerns in economistic terms, however, but rather in the language and central ideological structure of their time, that is, in an essentially religious mode of thought."[27] The culture-society dichotomy, which was employed with the intention of showing that workers' ideas had counted for something was used to discount workers' culture. This may be partly due to these authors' skepticism that religion and even thought are historically potent forces. But the discounting of the workers' own interpretation of their actions is licensed by the culture-society formula that begins by ascribing what is "real" to society.

Not only social but also cultural and intellectual historians have found it difficult to respectfully consider past people's culture as an actual historical force. For cultural historians are wedded as firmly as social

historians to the notion of the atomistic self whose real experience is social, not cultural. The fundamental problem of nineteenth-century culture, it is often said, was the loss "of autonomy in the emerging industrial society."[28] The profoundest criticism of mass culture offered by cultural historians is that it "became an extension of work" in industrial society: "a mechanized, standardized character pervaded both experiences."29 [emphasis added] That is, mass culture did not have the fundamental spiritual qualities pertinent to culture -- a critical, thoughtful, soulful antithesis of material, mechanical, or social "reality." Thus cultural historians have been wed to a fundamental value of the genteel tradition they intend to criticize -- the atomistic, spiritual self.

How would a semiotic approach improve things? First, by recognizing that all thought is in signs, we could give up the mistaken notion that the distinction between conscious and unconscious thought is a distinction between known and unknown experience. By recognizing that no thought is "conscious" in the seventeenth century meaning of the word, by recognizing that thought is interpretation rather than experience, we would place ourselves on the same level as past people. We would become, like them, interpreters, trying to understand their thoughts. This does not mean that we could not disagree with them; their interpretations would be as susceptible to error as ours since they, no more than we, had immediate, conscious

experience of their thoughts. But a semiotic approach would mean that it would be impossible to discount their interpretations as irrelevant to their "behavior," for in the absence of passive experience, thinking or interpretation of signs can be nothing but behavior. How past people interpreted their thoughts was what they did, a historical fact as "real" as their workplace.

Second, by getting rid of the notion of the self as a privileged sanctum of experience, we might overcome the logic that has led us to believe that the key to history is in local studies of communities populated by experiencing selves. As presently conducted, community studies are based on premises that limit their usefulness for understanding an industrializing society. The approach is based on anthropologists' view that little communities offer the best vantage point for holistic study of humanity, a view that in turn is based partly on the notion of the atomistic self whose life experience is formed by the village.[30] Regardless of whether or not this approach is appropriate for the colonial era when most white Americans did live in towns and villages, it is not suitable for study of an industrializing society, many of whose basic organizations far transcended local communities and depended for their very existence on huge markets.[31] I question, in short, the experiential premises that have supported the view that nineteenth-century society is approached more basically by study of local communities than of trans-local organizations

and "forces" such as corporations, labor unions, political parties, government, "industrialism," and "modernism." These large institutions and "forces" are truly beyond the experiential range of any atomistic self. But by abandoning the notion of thought as experience, we may view trans-local entities as thoughts or interpretations, as human creations. It is not necessary to view people as mere subjects of "experience" in order to keep history decently centered on humanity.

The lamentable dearth of synthesis in recent historical studies is sometimes ascribed to the difficulty of relating the wealth of discrete information revealed by studies of communities, gender, and ethnic groups.[32] But perhaps the problem is not too much information but only the impossibility of relating the information so long as history is conceived of as a local phenomenon experienced in the self. For the corollary is that human beings do not create history but only use culture to "resist" the "experience" thrust upon them by trans-local forces such as industrialism.[33] By considering history not as resistance to experience but as interpretation of signs we may recognize that history itself is a synthetic process and that in that process some interpreters are more creative or powerful than others. Distinguishing between the powerful and the powerless is the necessary first step to recognition that there has also been oppression and injustice.

[1]Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 105.

[2]Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 115.

[3]Ovid, Metamorphoses, VII.20; cf. St. Paul, Romans 7:14-28.

[4]Norman Dain, Concepts of Insanity in the United States, 1789-1865 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1964), 59-60; Dorothea Dix, Remarks on Prisons and Prison Discipline in the United States (Boston, 1845), 60.

[5]Horace Bushnell, Christian Nurture (Hartford, 1847), 16.

[6]Thomas Upham, Elements of Mental Philosophy (Boston, 1831), I, 43.

[7]Theodore Dwight Weld to William Lloyd Garrison, Jan. 2, 1833, Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld, and Sarah Grimke, ed. Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1934), 98.

[8]Beecher, Autobiography (New York, 1865), II, 86; Finney, Memoirs (New York, 1876), 16.

[9]Edwards A. Park, Memoir of Nathanael Emmons (Boston, 1860), 365; Emmons, Works, Jacob Ide (Boston, 1860), II, 411-415.

[10]Isaac Ray, A Treatise on the Medical Jurisprudence of Insanity (Boston, 1838), passim; Janet Ann Tighe, "A Question of Responsibility: The Development of American Forensic Psychiatry, 1838-1930" (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1983), chapter 2.

[11]Michael G. Kenny, The Passion of Ansel Bourne: Multiple Personality in American Culture (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986), chaps. 3 and 4.

[12]G. Stanley Hall, Adolescence (New York: D. Appleton, 1904), II, 309; Oliver Wendell Holmes, The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table (Boston, 1858), 86.

[13]Robert Fuller, Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), p. 115; Gail Thain Parker, Mind Cure in New England: From the Civil War to World War I (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1973), pp. 10, 19; Morton Prince, The Nature of Mind and Human Automatism (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1885), 141, 151, 155.

[14]Lippmann, Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest, ed. William E. Leuchtenburg (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985; 1914), 148.

[15]James, "Does Consciousness Exist," Essays in Radical Empiricism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 4-6; Dewey, "The Ego as Cause," Early Works (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), IV, 94.

[16]Peirce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), V, 169.

[17]Derrida, Of Grammatology (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 93.

[18]Peirce, "The Categories in Detail," Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), I, 171..

[19]John Putnam Demos, Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 275.

[20]Herbert G. Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," American Historical Review (June 1973), 541-542.

[21]Paul G. Faler, Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1780-1860 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), xi-xii.

[22]Faler, Mechanics and Manufacturers, xvii; cf. Tamara Hareven, Family Time and Industrial Time: The Relaitonship Between Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 5, 363-365.

[23]Faler, Mechanics and Manufacturers, 105. No documentation is offered for the assertion that the "established church" in Lynn was so retrograde. But the assertion requires documentation. Many Congregationalist churches in eastern Massachusetts had by this time given up the harsher doctrines of Calvinism.

[24]Faler, Mechanics and Manufacturers, 102.

[25]Faler, Mechanics and Manufacturers, 137.

[26]Paul E. Johnson, A Shopkeeper's Millenium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 138.

[27]Mary P. Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 65; cf. Johnson, Shopkeeper's Millenium, 12.

[28]T. J. Jackson Lears, No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 38.

[29]John F. Kasson, Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 108.

[30]Robert Redfield, The Little Community: Viewpoints for the Study of a Human Whole (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), esp. chap. 4. Many of the community studies for the colonial era were inspired by this book. See Demos, Entertaining Satan, pp. 482-483.

[31]Alfred D. Chandler, The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), esp. chaps. 7-9.

[32]Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," The Journal of American History (June 1986), 129; Herbert G. Gutman, "The Missing Synthesis: Whatever Happened to History?" The Nation (November 21, 1981), 553-554.

[33]Francis G. Couvares, The Remaking of Pittsburgh: Class and Culture in an Industrial City, 1877-1919 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 4.