Henry Adams

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Henry Adams: The Historian as Political Theorist.

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Chapter 5
Democracy and Empire

The observation that Adams wrote a novel rather than a theoretical treatise is not really intended as a complaint, though the latter would certainly have been interesting. Adams’s Democracy, published anonymously in 1880, while perhaps not very compelling as a work of fiction, is of considerable interest for its ideas; it was widely read in both Washington and England amidst a great deal of speculation about its authorship. Though it does not take the form, it has some of the characteristics of a philosophical dialogue, in which several different positions are advanced with considerable power. It is also a roman à clef in which the several characters are modeled on public figures or on friends of Adams and his wife Clover.'

The Novel as Theory

The protagonist is a wealthy young widow, Madeleine Lee, who doubtless represents both his wife and Adams himself and probably exhibits characteristics of others of their friends as well. She moves to Washington and establishes a fashionable salon in which she encounters the corrupt Senator Silas Ratcliffe, whose romantic interest in Madeleine precipitates a moral crisis for the idealistic young woman. Mrs. Lee had left New York, which she thought boring, since she had no interest in stock prices and little in the men who bought and sold them. “She had,” the narrator tells us, “become serious,” too serious, apparently, for the banalities of finance and commerce. Europe was exhausted, in her view, and she had come to realize that she was totally American, though by no means uncritically so, and she intended “to get all that American life had to offer, good or bad.” She was well read in American history and literature, not to mention other contemporary writings. And, like the Adamses, she was entirely ready to defend American society against European snobbery:

Society in America? Indeed there is society in America, and very good society too; but it has a code of its own, and newcomers seldom under-
stand it. I will tell you what it is, . . . and you will never be in danger of making any mistake. "Society" in America means all the honest, kindly-mannered, pleasant-voiced women, and all the good, brave, unassuming men, between the Atlantic and the Pacific. Each of these has a free pass in every city and village, "good for each generation only," and it depends on each to make use of this pass or not as may happen to suit his or her fancy. To this rule there are no exceptions.²

"She wanted," the narrator tells us, "to see with her own eyes the action of primary force; . . . She was bent upon getting to the heart of the great American mystery of democracy and government." Deeper still, "What she wished to see, she thought, was the clash of interests, the interests of forty millions of people and a whole continent, centering at Washington; guided, restrained, controlled, or unrestrained or uncontrollable, by men of ordinary mould; the tremendous forces of government, and the machinery of society, at work. What she wanted, was POWER." But even more important, in the midst of an intense discussion, she admits to a strange and probably impossible goal, redolent of the Adams family creed; "I must know whether America is right or wrong." This is a question that can be asked only by a severe moralist; the issue is not whether the citizens are happy or public policy is sound or individual rights are protected or the country is safe from attack, or even whether the Constitution is being followed. Instead, the question is entirely a moral one, reflecting Adams's New England conscience as clearly as anything ever did.

With this mind-set Madeleine Lee conducts her brilliant and fashionable salon, one that mirrors the one over which Henry and Marian "Clover" Adams presided in Washington. There is not a great deal of action in the novel, but there is much fine talk in which a considerable range of attitudes toward democracy is displayed. The themes discussed are those raised in the essays collected in *The Great Secession Winter*, "power, democracy, reform, party, the Presidency."³ Adams as narrator puts one dimension of the problem very sharply, if a little cynically: "Democracy, rightly understood, is the government of the people, by the people, for the benefit of Senators," a point that clearly echoes his journalism. It is the villainous Senator Ratcliffe, standing in for Senators James G. Blaine and Roscoe Conkling, who, in the course of a discussion about reform and corruption, responds to Baron Jacobi, representing Old World cynicism. Taking what he assumes to be a "realistic" position, he says, "No representative government can long be much better or much worse than the society it represents. Purify society and you purify the
government. But try to purify the government artificially, and you only aggravate failure.”

The baron responds with a major salvo:

I declare to you that in all my experience I have found no society which has had elements of corruption like the United States. The children in the cities are corrupt, and know how to cheat me. The cities are corrupt and also the towns and the counties and the States’ legislatures and the judges. Everywhere men betray trusts both public and private, steal money, run away with public funds. Only in the Senate men take no money. And you gentlemen in the Senate very well declare that your great United States, which is the head of the civilized world, can never learn anything from the example of corrupt Europe. You are right—quite right. I do much regret that I have not yet one hundred years to live. If I could then come back to this city, I should find myself very content—much more than now. I am always content where there is much corruption, and ma parole d’honneur! . . . the United States will then be more corrupt than Rome under Caligula; more corrupt than the Church under Leo X; more corrupt than France under the Regent.

Senator Ratcliffe, himself more than a little tinged by corruption, makes no response and leaves the room. It falls to Nathan Gore, a brilliant if perhaps somewhat stuffy historian and diplomat, to offer a defense of democracy not unlike the views of Henry Adams articulated at the height of his youthful idealism, as well as in the History, which was still a work in progress when he wrote Democracy.

I believe in democracy. I accept it. I will faithfully serve and defend it. I believe in it because it appears to me the inevitable consequence of what has gone before it. Democracy asserts the fact that the masses are now raised to a higher intelligence than formerly. All our civilization aims at this mark. We want to do what we can to help it. I myself want to see the result. I grant it is an experiment, but it is the only direction society can take that is worth its taking; the only conception of its duty large enough to satisfy its instincts; the only result that is worth an effort or a risk. Every other step is backward and I do not care to repeat the past. I am glad to see society grapple with issues in which no one can afford to be neutral.

Mrs. Lee challenges his position, asking what will happen if “society destroys itself with universal suffrage, corruption, and communism?” And
Core replies with a declaration of faith: “faith in human nature; faith in science; faith in the survival of the fittest.” In spite of the fact that some think that Adams is hostile to democracy, here Core clearly speaks for the author. Irving Howe, a democratic socialist surely not in thrall to Adams’s ideas, is on the mark when he says that Core’s speech reflects “a deep bias of Adams’ mind.” And Ernest Samuels notes that it “came from the depths of Adams’s heart, that it spoke the irreducible dogmas of his proud inheritance.” And so too, and just as surely, does Madeleine Lee’s hymn speak to the egalitarianism of American society. Adams had good reason to be critical of the condition of democracy in the United States during the 1880s, but this need not be translated into a general critique of democracy itself. Rather, in the words of J. C. Levenson, here at least he speaks in a tone of “prudent hopefulness.” The hope was to make a deeply corrupted democracy work better. Though at the end of the novel Adams pulls back from saying so, one conclusion implicit in the discussion is one that Henry James attributes to Clover Adams: “She tried to devote her life to defining what was best in her country, in a political situation where she often found herself among the worst.”

But Nathan Core does not even come close to having the last word in this discussion. Before that can come, it is necessary to deal with Senator Ratcliffe. Ratcliffe is a Mephistophelean or, better perhaps, a Machiavellian figure whose great advantage in this discussion of democracy is actually having had political experience, however depraved it might have been. It is this experience, as Howe says, that makes Ratcliffe so vital a figure, posing arguments “too good for the figure he is supposed to cut.”

In what little real action is depicted in the novel, Ratcliffe is struggling to win the hand of beautiful, rich, sophisticated Madeleine Lee. To do so, he must overcome her suspicion of his ethics in which the end justifies any and every means. His position is expressed with fearless openness. He proclaims that fidelity to his party is superior to everything but the national interest. He is contemptuous of philosophical politics and takes great pleasure in wielding political power. John Carrington, representing war-battered Southern aristocracy, simply dismisses him for being “blindly ignorant of morals,” a comment that is rather graceless coming from a Southerner who presumably fought for slavery, while Ratcliffe is identified with the antislavery party. Thus Ratcliffe is more complex than Carrington suggests. He is, the narrator tells us—perhaps ironically, but only partially so—“a great statesman.” His great talent as a legislator is to bring together so many hostile interests, always a valuable skill in the kaleidoscope of American politics. “The beauty of his work consisted in the skill with which he evaded questions of principle.”
real issues were not of principle but of power. The guiding idea “must be the want of principles.” And Ratcliffe is even more Machiavellian when he delivers his apologia, or credo. Somewhat disingenuously, he says that he is not one who is happy in political life; it is simply “the trade I am fittest for.” And he goes on, “ambition is my resource to make it tolerable. In politics we cannot keep our hands clean. I have done many things in my political career that are not defensible. To act with entire honesty and self-respect, one should always live in a pure atmosphere, and the atmosphere of politics is impure.” The Machiavellianism is clear. Ratcliffe would certainly have fully understood the force of Jean-Paul Sartre’s play *Dirty Hands*, in which corruption is a natural companion of political activity.

Thus Ratcliffe can admit, almost proudly and certainly with little or no remorse, that, in the crisis of the Civil War, he had fixed the contest for president in the state of Illinois, thereby saving the election and, as he saw it, preserving the Union. Mr. Carrington is shocked, but Adams, again as narrator, notes that he has missed Ratcliffe’s point, saying, “The man who has committed a murder for his country, is a patriot and not an assassin, even when he receives a seat in the Senate as his share of the plunder. Women cannot be expected to go behind the motives of that patriot who saves his country and his election in times of revolution.” But Mrs. Lee, unlike Carrington, is not shocked by Ratcliffe, or at least is not shocked enough to turn away his attentions. Only at the climax of the novel, when Ratcliffe is accused of accepting a bribe to support a piece of legislation, does she reject him. The senator admits to the bribe with some shame, though he insists that the money went to the party’s National Committee rather than to himself. But even here he admits regret for “not the doing, but the necessity of doing.” And he points out to Madeleine one of the deep truths of politics that every realist knows: “There are conflicting duties in all the transactions of life, except the simplest.” Even Henry Adams at his most idealistic understands this.

Madeleine is understandably disturbed, since she had been in danger of marrying someone who had committed a major felony. But her reaction goes beyond Ratcliffe to democratic politics as a whole. Proclaiming that “democracy has shaken my nerves to pieces,” she concludes that, in the narrator’s words, “She had got to the bottom of this business of democratic government, and found out that it was nothing more than government of any other kind.” There is nothing left, she thinks, but to return to the true democracy of her private charitable work, though it should be insisted that democracy is quite different from other forms of government, even though it is impure.

Madeleine’s abandonment of politics is a disturbing conclusion. The dif-
ference between democracy and antidemocracy or nondemocracy is much more than the difference between Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Democracy may share attributes—such as the use of political power—with other forms of politics. And of course, sometimes democracies, like other political systems, may become corrupt or abuse power or reach stupid decisions. But democratic government itself offers the best remedy to such situations. Adams knows this with at least part of himself when he speaks through Nathan Gore and also through Madeleine Lee when she enthuses about democratic society. Adams's well-justified revulsion for the deep-seated corruption in late-nineteenth-century America sometimes blinds him to the power of the democratic ideas that he himself has advanced in constructing the debates that form the intellectual substance of his novel. His is a failure of nerve. He builds up a strong structure of debate, which he undermines when Madeleine capitulates so easily to her more moralistic impulses. He would have done better to stick with the wisdom of his wife when, as Henry James suggested, she continued to look for the best even in the midst of the worst.

However, to return to Howe's point, Ratcliffe's ideas cannot be dismissed as easily as they are in the denouement of Adams's novel. Senator Ratcliffe is not an attractive character, and his arguments may be advanced too bluntly for our comfort, not to mention Adams's, but his thought cannot simply be brushed aside. Tacitly Adams seems to recognize this fact. Only after she learns that Ratcliffe has actually accepted a bribe does Madeleine reject her suitor. But by this time, she has already heard his harsh pronouncements on political morality and she knows that he has rigged an election, but these facts do not lead her to turn him away. Only what she takes to be a still greater crime can accomplish that. Perhaps what we see here is a "flirtation with pragmatism," a pull toward the less absolutist world of his friend William James or even, perhaps, to the world of Machiavelli. It is notable, as Michael Colacurcio points out, that "Adams refuses to let the battle between Ratcliffe and Mrs. Lee be fairly joined on theoretical grounds." And he adds, "perhaps successful government does depend on the rather free use of power by men more honest than Ratcliffe but less scrupulous than Adams." But to see this clearly would require Adams to be much more a *Homo politicus* than he was, in spite of his not very successful forays into independent politics and his hope that his vigorous journalism would bring him some measure of power. Like his heroine, he saw much, but what he saw shook his nerves to pieces also. In the end, neither Adams nor Madeleine Lee can accept pragmatic arguments. Philosophically they yearn for absolute truths. And like Madeleine, when Ratcliffe asks her to assume responsibility
by giving him moral guidance, Adams seems to say, with her, “No, no! . . . no responsibility. You ask more than I can give.” 25 In the end, both Madeleine and Adams opt out of politics. As Colacurcio says, “Mrs. Lee’s experience seems to be Adams’s recognition that, for him, private integrity and public power were incompatible.” 26

What Adams displays is an example of the classic Mugwump sensibility. 27 In his brilliant sketch of these reformers, Richard Hofstadter might well have had Adams in mind. In general, the Mugwumps were New Englanders who had trouble finding a place for themselves in the rapidly emerging postwar society. They typically ignored or accepted the often terrible conditions of the working class and rigidly adhered to the principles of laissez-faire economics, along with tariff and civil service reform. What influence they had was derived from sheer brain power and social position, but they were cut off from any base of mass support. Only when this isolation ended at the turn of the century could the Progressive movement become a real force in American politics. 28 Adams fits this picture almost perfectly. He is brilliant in political criticism, and his insights remain useful today in a world that exhibits forms of corruption all too close to those he endured. But he was temperamentally ill suited to engage in the political action that might have been able to come to grips with the situation of his time. And when the time came, and though he knew Theodore Roosevelt well, he never engaged with the Progressives. By then, his always restless mind had moved on to other things.

In particular, Adams had little grasp of the role of political parties in democratic politics. This is understandable in part, since the parties of his time were deeply corrupt, and this corruption went hand in hand with the similarly deep corruption of American finance and the emerging industrial system. 29 Nevertheless, the parties, even in their debased condition, performed useful functions that Adams could not see. (Perhaps not until the twentieth century could anyone achieve the perspective necessary to see them.) Among other things, they helped to socialize new immigrants and served as a much-needed social welfare agency for them. In exchange, they cast their ballots as they were told, sometimes, as the old saw has it, voting early and often. 30 But the socially useful functions of the machines were below Adams’s notice, though he was certainly not wrong to be bothered by the corruption of the urban organizations and of much else in American society as well.

But underneath the apparent surface moral simplicity of Adams’s novel there is a much more complex argument. He would like to be able to offer simple, absolutist, moral answers to the political issues of his time, but he is too intellectually sophisticated to be entirely satisfied with them, as is revealed
by the range of opinion offered in the pages of Democracy. Silas Ratcliffe is too powerful an enemy to be easily dismissed. So too is Baron Jacobi, for that matter. One is reminded of Plato’s Republic, where the initial argument of Thrasyymachus is merely shoved aside rather than defeated. The whole dialogue is the “true” answer, and when we have the whole dialogue, Plato’s own position is notoriously unclear. Of course, one way to read Plato is that he desires a system in which a superbly educated elite would rule in the interest of the whole. Adams is also tempted by this sort of thinking, as when he comments, “The great problem of every system of Government has been to place administration and legislation in the hands of the best men. We have tried our formula and find that it has failed in consequence of its clashing with our other fundamental principle that one man is as good as another.”

Perhaps, in this sense, Adam’s Democracy is also undemocratic, given its pessimistic conclusion, though the abrupt and underargued ending more clearly opens him to the charge of “premature closure.” In this view, the great theorists understand the open-ended nature of political argument and refrain from dogmatic conclusions. But, particularly with this in mind, if the views expressed by Nathan Gore and Madeleine Lee are combined with Adams’s celebration of the American people in the contemporaneous History, any picture of Adams as just another antidemocratic misanthrope is too simple by far. The “closure” of Democracy is not really earned through the arguments presented. Adams falls far short of having viable answers for the new social problems of his time, but still he cannot easily be dismissed as an antidemocrat. It is much closer to the point to say that Adams was in some internal tension on this basic issue, as he recognized the power of the democratic idea, argued for in the novel by Nathan Gore and Madeleine Lee, but observed its shortcomings in the era of the Great Barbecue.

Before turning to some more general conclusions, a few other aspects of late-nineteenth-century American history should be noted. Two of these factors can best be addressed in the discussion of Adams’s general philosophy of history. One is his growing xenophobia, particularly taking the form of anti-Semitism, which begins to appear after roughly 1890. There is no escaping this deplorable side of Adams’s work; it is frequently vicious, but as I said in the introduction, it does not seem to be central to his theories and is, for the most part, confined to his letters. In any case, I believe that it is more appropriate to discuss it in the context of his reflections on the development of Western history. The second major theme, which also can best be handled later, is of enormous importance: his growing fascination with technology and his clear sense of its centrality not only to the history of the United States,
but to the whole world as well. On this matter, Adams is a major prophet, and an extensive discussion is needed.

The third theme does require some comment here. That is the emergence of the United States as an imperial power. Adams has relatively little to say in his public pronouncements about this gigantic phenomenon; by then, his mind was fixed on more cosmic concerns. However, in his letters he reveals a good deal. Since Adams's best friend John Hay was ambassador to the Court of St. James and then secretary of state under Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt, he had an insider's view of events, and since Hay viewed Adams as an expert on foreign affairs, Adams may well have been a significant influence on policy, though not everything went his way. As Adams wrote to Hay, assessing his own role, "One has a right . . . to know what one's friends think. I never advise; I only diagnose, but it comes to the same thing." Again, it is useful to recall the Mugwump sensibility: fiercely nationalist; filled with foreboding about the fate of the world; hating big business, bankers, and trusts; fearing immigrants and workers; and often exhibiting anti-Semitism. In these thoughts, they were often at one with their apparent antithesis, the Populists. Some of this description doubtless applies to Henry Adams, though it is a closer fit when applied to his brother Brooks. In any case, Henry sometimes emerges as a more flexible and more sympathetic figure than Hofstadter's general discussion of the Mugwumps might suggest.

Certainly, many of Adams's views turned out to be startlingly prescient. As early as 1898, he foresaw the cataclysm of World War I as English power declined. Like his mentor de Tocqueville, he saw the emergence of Russia as a great power, as well as a revolutionary upheaval in that country that made him "half crazy with fear." He also foresaw the rise of Japan, China, and the Pacific Rim. In response, he wanted an "Atlantic system," ranging from the Rockies to the Elbe, with an Anglo-American rapprochement at the center. As David Contosta points out, "Despite exaggerations and downright mistakes in judgement, Adams anticipated nearly every major shift in the international balance of power during the twentieth century, including those that transpired long after his death. That it turned out to be an American century would not have surprised him at all." And in the Education, he sees something not at all unlike the structure of the contemporary political economy: "This was the instinct of what might be named McKinleyism; the system of combinations, consolidations, trusts, realized at home, and realizable abroad." Unsurprisingly, Adams was not an admirer of McKinley. As Samuels writes, "He disliked McKinley's methods and saw in him only 'a very subtle and highly paid agent for the crudest capitalism,'" but at least his temperament
was more palatable than that of his successor, Theodore Roosevelt: "From the beginning neither Adams nor Hay had been able to take Roosevelt's candidacy seriously." In spite of long years of friendship with Roosevelt, Adams worried. In the *Education* he comments, "Power when wielded by abnormal energy is the most serious of facts, and all Roosevelt's friends know that his restless and combative energy was more than abnormal." He was "pure act," a characteristic hardly likely to be attractive to so contemplative and cerebral a man as Adams.40

As for empire, though in the end Adams supported war with Spain, he worked hard for a peaceful resolution leading to Cuban independence, and he strongly opposed the annexation of the Philippines, using his influence in Congress and the McKinley administration to try to stop it. Annexation was contrary to America’s national revolutionary heritage and "contrary to every profession or so-called principle of our lives and history." 41 These are certainly not the positions of a jingoistic radical so common at the time.

**The Crisis of the Late Nineteenth Century**

Henry Adams looked very deeply into some of the main currents of American life and politics in the late nineteenth century. At times his views were jaundiced and dyspeptic, but more generous impulses were at work too, and many of his diagnoses of the pathologies of his time were on the mark. There was a constitutional imbalance between Congress and the presidency. Woodrow Wilson, in an early attempt to get behind the paper text of the Constitution, looked at the American system as it operated in fact and saw a system of congressional dominance, though he did not share Adams's intense dislike for the Senate. And James Bryce, in his great work on American politics, was led to speculate on why great men did not become president.42 Moreover, there was surely a need for some sort of civil service reform. Here, in spite of the impression one might get from reading the *Education*, Adams’s polemics contributed to the passage of the Pendleton Act, though that legislation certainly did not meet with the success the reformers had hoped for.43 It hardly needs to be added that the corruption of the urban machines and the financial system was as broad, deep, and genuinely scandalous as Adams said. Industrial capitalism had taken firm control of the nation’s destiny. Looking back at the results, he wrote:

[Adams] had stood up for his eighteenth century, his Constitution of 1789, his George Washington, his Harvard College, his Quincy, and
his Plymouth Pilgrims, as long as anyone would stand up with him. He had said it was hopeless twenty years before, but he had kept on, in the same old attitude, by habit and taste, until he found himself altogether alone. He had hugged his antiquated dislike of bankers and capitalistic society until he had become little better than a crank. He had known for years that he must accept the regime. . . . The matter was settled at last by the people. For a hundred years, between 1793 and 1893, the American people had hesitated, vacillated, swayed forward and back, between two forces, one simply industrial, the other capitalistic, centralizing, and mechanical. In 1893, the issue came on the single gold standard, and the majority at last declared itself, once and for all, in favor of the capitalistic system with all its necessary machinery. . . . Of all forms of society or government, this was the one he liked least, but his likes or dislikes were as antiquated as the rebel doctrine of State rights.

Continuing in the same vein, Adams says that such a society must be run by capital and capitalistic methods so that the populist idea of ruling the system by a coalition of Southern and Western farmers with urban laborers was doomed to fail, just as it had in 1800 and 1828. He concludes with some surprise and not a little acerbity:

Such great revolutions commonly leave some bitterness behind, but nothing in politics ever surprised Henry Adams more than the ease with which he and his silver friends slipped across the chasm, and alighted on the single gold standard and the capitalistic system with its methods; the protective tariff; the corporations and the trusts; the trades-unions and socialistic paternalism which necessarily made their compliment; the whole mechanical consolidation of force, which ruthlessly stamped out the life of the class into which Adams was born, but created monopolies capable of controlling the new energies that America adored.44

However, Adams's insights, while often deep, were also often narrow. He seems to have hoped for a return to some form of eighteenth-century constitutionalism, in which not only the balance between the branches of government but also the balance between the nation and the states would be restored. But this is to take a narrowly institutionalist position suggesting that the proper constitutional arrangements were the key to everything, a surprising point of view for one who was so sensitive to the momentous changes in the social and economic factors that shaped the Constitution during his
lifetime. In this time of a healthy neo-institutionalism in political science, few today would argue that institutions are of little importance; consider only the impact of constitutional structures and Senate rules in the impeachment proceedings against President Clinton. But institutions are clearly affected by extraconstitutional forces. And after all, as Adams contends in the History, as early as the Jefferson administration the original Constitution had been torn into so much scrap paper. Even if that is written off as an exaggeration, the Civil War certainly wrought a profound transformation of the constitutional structure; it was no longer possible to doubt that membership in the Union was permanent, and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, while of regrettably little immediate effect other than the enormously important abolition of slavery itself, made possible the mid-twentieth-century struggles for civil rights. And surely the tremendous economic changes following the war, of which Adams was so deeply aware, forced equally large alterations in constitutional politics. In addition to all this, it is evident from contemporary debates that discovery of the “intent of the Framers,” even if desirable, is next to impossible, so that an attempt to return to a presumably pristine earlier order is to pursue a chimera.

But the problem with Adams’s view goes deeper than his well-intentioned constitutional purism. For all his intellectual acuity, he simply did not quite grasp some of the major events of his time. I have already commented on the first, namely, his inability to see the importance of a genuine Reconstruction of the former slaveholding states in the Old South. Partly, this was due to a limitation of his vision, tinged as it no doubt was by the sort of racism that was pervasive in nineteenth-century America and is all too common to this day, even if in altered forms. But more than this, as his paper “The Independents in the Canvass” shows, Adams was unable to imagine that the gentlemanly leaders of the plantation South would systematically deny the civil rights of the former slaves if they were returned to power. Perhaps this was due to the lingering sympathy of a Northern aristocrat for his Southern counterparts, in spite of the violent falling out over slavery. If only the latter could be destroyed, thought Adams, a happy and prosperous Union could be restored. Thus, early on, he bought into the mythology of black-dominated legislatures, carpetbaggers and scalawags, and a downtrodden South suffering under the heel of Northern occupiers. But now, of course, the commonly accepted historical view is that Reconstruction failed not because it was too harsh but because it did not go far enough, that it did not establish the conditions for a democratic politics that included the ex-slaves, now citizens in
form but hardly in practice. Adams was in tune with the thought of his time, but on this issue, that thought was destructively off the mark.

Ironically, the end of Reconstruction was signaled by the agreement that concluded the dispute over the election of 1876, in which Democrat Samuel J. Tilden won the popular vote and came within one vote of a majority in the electoral college but lost out to Rutherford B. Hayes in a deal between Northern Republican business interests, particularly those of the railroads, and conservative white Southerners. This compromise became the prototype for a coalitional form that assumed enormous power in American politics for the better part of a century. One wonders if Adams understood the link between the sort of sectional peace he favored and the growing industrial-capitalist power he detested. As for those powers, Adams made many potent criticisms of those who held them and the institutional distortions their position caused. But his focus was largely limited to political and economic elites, and he displayed little concern for the impact the new economic system had on those at the bottom of the new economic order. Even in an increasingly urban, industrial society, and in spite of his expressed admiration for Karl Marx, he had no use for socialism and was not part of the intellectual movement toward the welfare state whose first stirrings could be observed in many of his contemporaries. Nor did he show much interest in the possibilities of government regulation of the new power centers. In fact, his attachment to laissez-faire economics may have been enough by itself to deter him. Thus, his was a powerful voice, but it was largely critical, though usefully so, rather than constructive.

Adams was writing at a historical juncture where new forms of state organization were needed to deal with the new concentrations of financial and industrial power that developed with such explosive force after the Civil War. Although in the next decades the United States was to move toward increasingly powerful, centralized state forms, this was contrary to earlier American traditions in which, from a European point of view, the nation, as one of the attributes of its "exceptionalism," could hardly be said to have had a "state" at all. In a long, complex process, the American "state" was first patched and then, during the Progressive movement, reconstituted. This took place, as Stephen Skowronek notes, "through political struggles rooted in and mediated by preestablished institutional arrangements." It is fair to assume that intellectual-ideological conflicts were part of this process. Some members of the upper class, certainly including Adams, doubtless suffered from what Hofstadter called "status anxiety," a deep-seated perception that a once secure
position of power is slipping away. One can easily see it in the lament quoted earlier. However, others were part of a newly developing reformist, professional elite of social scientists. As Skowronek puts it, "the institutional reform movements of the late nineteenth century represent a linkage between an older patrician style of deference politics and a new professional style based on expertise." Adams was obviously one of those patricians, though, to repeat, his offerings were more critical than constructive, even though in foreign policy and finance he had a good deal of expertise to offer. Still, aside from his long and somewhat quixotic fight against Republican orthodoxy, he displayed little interest in the newer currents of reform.

Around 1890, Adams's career took a decided change in direction. With the completion of the History, he ceased to be a historian in any ordinary sense, though he did have some status as an elder statesman within the profession. And he had already left journalism behind long before. Thereafter, his interests turned to often very high-level speculation, even if in the guise of a study of medieval thought and architecture or his formally idiosyncratic "autobiography." Therefore, perhaps this is an appropriate time to make a preliminary assessment of the "historian as political theorist," at the end of this more orthodox phase of his career, though this obviously cannot be the last word on the subject, which is reconsidered in the final chapter.

To say orthodox certainly implies no criticism, nor does it suggest that Adams's work in the early and middle phases of his career was not powerfully critical or deny the strong theoretical impulse that ran through it. However, placing Adams in the eddying currents of American thought is not simple. It is almost conventional wisdom to follow Louis Hartz and define the American political tradition as liberal in its essence, with its emphasis on laissez-faire, individual rights, competitiveness, distrust of government, and so forth. Adams himself was inclined to identify his own position as liberal as well as democratic, which makes good sense, given his embrace of a putatively liberal Constitution and his devotion to liberal economics. Yet in the past thirty years, the hegemony of liberalism over the American mind has been challenged by a form of thought labeled republican, a concept just as difficult to pin down as liberalism. Perhaps the central idea of republicanism is virtue, whether in the form of a virtuous citizenry or virtuous leaders. In any event, both citizens and leaders need to be on guard against the nemesis of sound republicanism, namely, corruption, the subordination of the public good to special interests. Republicanism also includes an important warning that there is a tension between virtue and commerce. Until the late 1960s, the American Revolution was assumed to be liberal, deeply under the influence
of John Locke. However, the new republican reading of revolutionary history challenged the theory of the Revolution as liberal by suggesting that what really set off the Revolution was fear of corruption as a threat to republican virtue, stemming from the corruption of the British Empire itself. By now, almost no one believes that liberalism can be replaced in American history by republican theory, as some seemed to believe at the high tide of what came to be called the “republican synthesis.” When the revolutionaries spoke of republicanism, they referred first of all to the absence of a king, and though they did indeed fear corruption in the republican sense, they also were devoted to the preservation of a highly liberal set of individual rights. For example, one need only consider the well-known language of the Declaration of Independence. Nor did any of the Founders spend time debating the fine points of liberalism versus republicanism, since they were much too busy making a revolution and writing a constitution to debate the sort of theoretical niceties recent political theorists have enjoyed discussing. And after much debate, a lot of it quite fruitful, students of American thought have come to see the ideas of the founding period as a complex mix of liberal and republican ideas. The real question is how early liberalism emerged as the dominant force it is—or at least was, until recently.54

In the perspective of this history, Adams is a very interesting case. There are surely important liberal components in his thought, but there is a lot to be said for the position of Russell Hanson and Richard Merriman that Adams was one of the last, if not the last, of the civic republicans.55 He himself would not have discussed his position in terms of liberalism versus republicanism, and it is also clear that his devotion to laissez-faire was liberal and perhaps deeply antirepublican in its implications. One could claim that the Constitution to which he was so committed was also liberal, even though defectively so, given its acceptance of slavery. And later, it will be necessary to take into account Adams’s doubtless ironical but still provocative presentation of his position as that of a conservative Christian anarchist. But that is a subsequent development in his thought. At least for the first phase of his career, there is much to support the republican interpretation.

Adams’s frequent remark that his was an essentially eighteenth-century mind ill at ease in his own century is at the heart of the republican component of his thought. He had a powerfully developed sense of the tension between virtue and commerce or, in the terms of Hanson and Merriman, “wealth and commonwealth.”56 He was drawn to the eighteenth century because then it was still possible to escape the determinism that he saw as such a powerful force as early as the years covered in the History. This is one of
the reasons why Albert Gallatin was his favorite American statesman. Gallatin was a man of the highest ideals who had the chance to act, free of the powers that shaped policy and that soon began to spin out of control. “The early history of the republic was to a significant degree open to human intervention. The fate of the young republic was not predetermined.” Yet even then, men like Gallatin had to wrestle with forces they themselves did not create.37 As the end of the nineteenth century drew near, Adams could only warn through the powerful medium of his historical and journalistic writing, as well as his novel Democracy. This is history written in something like a classically republican mode, in which an effort is made to recall an errant, increasingly corrupt republic back to its founding principles. It is a history of statesmen, soldiers, and virtuous citizens. Increasingly, it takes the form of a lament, or, to revert to the language of Adams’s Puritan ancestors, of the Jeremiad. But by 1890, Adams seems to have felt that there was no more audience for such sermons. The problem was not the worthlessness of the Constitution or of democracy. Rather, it was that these ideals had been corrupted by the subversive forces of industrial capitalism. Surely there was reason for Adams to mourn the condition of late-nineteenth-century democracy, just as there was reason to worry about the condition of late-twentieth-century democracy for many of the same reasons. This is why we, and particularly those engaged in the republican revival or its close cousin, the communitarian movement, may still be able to learn from Adams.38 He does not always make it easy, with his retrograde attitudes on Reconstruction and his dated attachment to the dogmas of laissez-faire, but surely he is worth more attention than he receives from students of American political thought.

And yet, as important and revealing as the republican hypothesis is, it cannot fully capture the complexity of Adams’s multifaceted thought. Another possibility is simply to absorb him into the conservative tradition, as suggested by Russell Kirk.39 But Kirk, doubtless among others, seems to have been deceived by Adams’s posthumously published collection of essays, originally edited by his brother Brooks and assigned by him the title The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma. In fact, this collection has precious little to do with either democracy or politics and not very much more to do with history as ordinarily understood. The title reflects more of Brooks’s eccentric views than those of his older brother, while the essays themselves deal with Adams’s fruitless search for a genuinely scientific theory of history rooted in physics. And if Henry Adams was in some sense what we call a conservative, then what do we make of the fact that he has been widely admired by such mainstream liberal historians as Henry Commager and Arthur Schlesinger,
Jr., as well as liberal literary critics such as Alfred Kazin? Or still further away from Kirk, what about his influence on Martin Sklar, a writer often associated with the New Left and the theory of corporate liberalism? Thinkers of a wide range of persuasions have clearly found inspiration in the work of Adams, no doubt a tribute to the protean character of his work.

But for whatever reason, perhaps out of sheer despair, Adams turned his attention to more speculative ventures as he tried to understand the role of religion in human life, particularly as played off against the wonders of science and technology and the dynamics of Western capitalism, while at the same time trying to chart the evolution, as well as the stops and starts, of his own remarkably capacious mind. Though his later writings can hardly be labeled history as ordinarily conceived, we can learn from them a great deal about the course of American development and of the Western world's as well. These works are a remarkable, if sometimes quirky, intellectual edifice in which Adams engages in a very American, very individualistic attempt to create a portrait of his own unique and often eccentric self.