In the early twentieth century, it was easy to see the emerging problem of a threat to democracy stemming from the development of technology, the science that supported it, and the growing concentration of economic power they contributed to. Adams's philosophy of history emerged from his reflections on these large themes, both in the United States and around the world. It is important to look more closely at this set of powerful forces, starting with the impact of technology.

Technology and the Virgin

The most striking glimpse Adams offers into the new world of technology is the contrast between the Virgin and the dynamo. So far, all that has been considered in this regard is the Virgin as a force so great as to provide the impetus to build the great medieval cathedrals. There is no doubt that Adams was right, up to a point. In religiously saturated Europe, the Virgin was a great spiritual power that stimulated an explosion of artistic expression—an explosion equaled, perhaps, but not surpassed in the history of Western art. But it is also important to remember that although the cathedral builders may have been inspired by Mary, the buildings themselves were among the most important engineering feats of their time. I have no wish to detract from Mary's spiritual inspiration, but this last point must be considered, for Adams, in his idealization of the Middle Ages, tends to ignore it. This fact cannot be explained by ignorance or lack of interest in the topic, since in writing of the War of 1812, for example, he devotes a good deal of space to celebrating American inventive technological genius in critical areas such as gunnery and shipbuilding. Lynn White, Jr., goes some distance in narrowing the gap between the spiritual and the material that Adams suggests. He asks what we see when we visit Beauvais or Laon. What we see are "structures which are the greatest engineering feats in human history up to the time of their building. The technicians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, far from being
traditionalists, were creating an entirely new concept of architecture, dynamic rather than static. In their cathedrals we see a sublime fusion of high spirituality and advanced technology."

This is not intended to discount Adams’s idealization of the Virgin, nor to alter the exalted place of women in Adams’s thinking. What White suggests instead is that “the Virgin and the dynamo are not opposing principles permeating the universe; they are allies. The growth of medieval power technology, which escaped Adams’s attention, is a chapter in the conquest of freedom.” It is perhaps too much to say that Adams paid no attention to medieval technology, but his emphasis is certainly different from White’s. Moreover, White adds, this growth in humanitarian technology is part of the history of religion; it shows that technology can be put to humane use. It is not rooted in the economic necessity that is part of every society. But it has found expression only in the West, nourished, White contends, by Western theology. The labor-saving power machines of medieval Europe “harmonized with the religious assumption of the infinite worth of even the most seemingly degraded human personality,” because of a repugnance “toward subjecting any man to monotonous drudgery which seems less than human.” Thus, contends White, we have been too easily impressed by Adams’s striking symbols. Implicit in his view is the thought that Adams’s spiritual and technological concerns can be reconciled, though White overestimates Adams’s dislike for technology and thus fails to see Adams’s guarded approval of the technological revolution of his own time and overestimates the need for reconciliation. Nor is it clear that he sees Adams as providing an aesthetic standard for political and social as well as artistic achievement.

Of course, this possible resolution of the tension between Virgin and dynamo does not invalidate Adams’s amazingly far-seeing concerns about the potential impact of modern technology, concerns that long antedated the revolutionary developments at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1862, in a much quoted letter to his brother Charles, he writes, “I tell you these are great times. Man has mounted science, and is now run away with. I firmly believe that before many centuries more, science will be the master of man. The engines he will have invented will be beyond his strength to control. Some day science may have the existence of mankind in its power, and the human race commit suicide by blowing up the world.” He adds, along with more fanciful things, that one day man will cruise in space. Then, much later in life, thinking about his theory of the accelerating pace of history, he writes to his former student, the historian Henry Osborn Taylor:
The assumption of unity which was the mark of human thought in
the middle-ages has yielded very slowly to the proofs of complexity.
The stupor of science before radium is a proof of it. Yet it is quite
clear, according to my score of ratios and curves, that, at the acceler­
ated rate of progression shown since 1600, it will not need another
century or half century to tip thought upside down. Law, in that case
would disappear as theory or a priori principle, and give place to force.
Morality would become police. Explosives would reach cosmic vio­
lence. Disintegration would overcome integration.4

Understandably, passages like this often lead to the conclusion that
Adams was an antimodernist with powerful technophobic leanings. It is cer­
tainly true that he had a genuine fear of the technological future. And it is
equally certain, as more and more of his predictions come true, that these
fears were not groundless. But for all that, Adams was not a technophobe. He
was perhaps as attracted to the new technology as he was frightened by it,
and he maintained an intense interest in the natural sciences on which tech­
nological development was based. Like many of us today, he adopted a
bemused but welcoming attitude to the everyday uses of technology. “A world
so different from that of my childhood or middle-age can’t belong to the same
scheme. . . . Out of a medieval, primitive, crawling infant of 1838, to find
oneself a howling, steaming, exploding, Marconing, radiumating, automo­
biling maniac of 1904 exceeds belief.” Along with the amazement, the wry
tone cannot conceal the note of pleasure, even of delight.

A more general case for Adams’s endorsement of technology can be
made. Of course, he was deeply skeptical about the notion of moral and
material progress, but, as Cecilia Tichi argues, he “looked to the example
of the engineer for the potential redemption of the wayward culture.” This
is a theme that appears frequently in his work.6 Tichi’s analysis supports
many of the points I have made about Adams’s interest in technology. One
should recall his enthusiasm for the technological ingenuity of the average
American in the administrations of Jefferson and Madison. And surely the
“new type of man” that Adams hopes can build the society that will bring
the trusts to heel would have to be a product of the technological age. Of
course, Adams is fully aware of the dangers of modern technology. He
understands the new capacity to blow up the earth, and he is also fully aware
of the threat of environmental degradation. On his way to Saint Louis to
attend the 1904 Exposition, he notices that “agriculture had made way for
steam; tall chimneys reeked smoke on every horizon, and dirty suburbs filled
with scrap-iron, scrap-paper, and cinders, formed the setting of every town. Evidently cleanliness was not to be the birthmark of the new American.” But the often deeply buried hope is still there; we must not lose sight of the modernist in Adams.

Tichi suggests that one example of that hope is his close friend Clarence King. Discussing the Education, she points out that Adams sees King as an exemplary figure, in fact, the type of figure Adams believed was needed for the American future. Professionally, King was an outstanding geologist and mining engineer. He knew art and America, especially the West; he knew politics; and “he knew even women; even the American woman; even the New York woman, which is saying much.” It was such active-minded men that Adams thought could rescue civilization. Of course, this may all be merely a dream, but it makes an interesting counterpoint to the more frequent outpourings of gloom in Adams’s later writings. And it is worth pointing out that King provides an example of the sort of man needed for the intellectual elite Adams thought was required to run the socialist economy that he privately discussed with both hope and fear in his correspondence with his brother Brooks.

Adams’s thoughts on technology reveal an exceedingly complex intellect at work. He was much too intelligent to become a Luddite, partly because he knew that the genie was already out of the bottle and that technological development could not be stopped, but also because he could see the advantages of the new technologies. The result was that he was deeply ambivalent about his observations, even as he recognized their frightening dimensions. And ambivalence seems to be absolutely the appropriate response. George Kateb writes, “It is plain that so much of the spirit of the West is invested in modern technology. We have referred to anger, alienation, resentment. But that cannot be the whole story.” The other considerations include virtuosity and skill for their own sake, a desire to make nature “beautiful or more beautiful,” and the reckless exhilaration of discovery and the overcoming of obstacles. “All these considerations move away,” Kateb says, “from anger, anxiety, resentment, and so on. The truth of the matter, I think, is that the project of modern technology, just like that of modern science, must attract a turbulence of response. The very passions and drives and motives that look almost villainous or hypermasculine simultaneously look like marks of the highest human aspiration, or, at the least, are not to be cut loose from the highest human aspiration.”

I think Henry Adams has some such sense, a sense captured by Daniel Bell when he refers to Adams’s “strange mingling of exultation and dismay.”
Again, this seems exactly the right response, for us as well as for Adams, and it is this mix that drives Adams to attempt to develop a scientific theory of the trajectory of history, a project begun in the Education and continued in a series of puzzling essays.

*Toward a Dynamic Theory of History*

In Adams's mind, the concluding chapters of the *Education* are linked to the concluding chapters of *Chartres*. While commenting on what he saw as the inadequacies in the literary form of both books, he wrote, "The volume on Chartres is involved in the same doubt, for both go together, the three last chapters of the Education being the Q.E.D. of the three last chapters of Chartres." And to William James, he wrote, "Weary of my own imbecility, I tried to clean off a bit of the surface of my own mind, in 1904, by printing a volume on the twelfth century, where I could hide, in the last hundred pages, a sort of anchor in history. I knew that not a hundred people in America would understand what I meant, and these were all taught in Jesuit schools, where I should be a hell-born scorpion."

In these chapters he tries to account for an observation made earlier in the *Education*. "In plain words," he writes, "Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man." The church had continued to insist that anarchy was not order, but "suddenly, in 1900, science raised its head and denied." For Adams, there was nothing to do but to accept the findings of science; in this he was a modernist, even when that stance made him uncomfortable. All around him, he could see the signs of disorder and chaos as men engaged in a constant, Sisyphean struggle to maintain order. A child born in 1900 would inevitably be brought into a world characterized by multiplicity rather than unity. Adams goes on, brilliantly assessing the never-ending struggle between order and disorder:

He could not deny that the law of the new multiverse explained much that had been most obscure, especially the persistently fiendish treatment of man by man; the perpetual effort of society to establish law, and the perpetual revolt of society against the law it had established; the perpetual building up of authority by force, and the perpetual appeal to force to overthrow it; the perpetual symbolism of a higher law, and the perpetual relapse to a lower one; the perpetual victory of the principles of freedom, and their perpetual conversion into principles of power; but the staggering problem was the outlook ahead into the despotism of artificial order which nature abhorred."
Though Adams tries to cast his theory in scientific terms, it is rapid technological development made possible by science that is the driving force whose impact Adams wants to address. And he must try to achieve this end, recognizing at the same time that "the historian must not try to know what is truth, if he values his honesty; for, if he cares for his truths, he is certain to falsify his facts. The laws of history only repeat the lines of force or thought. Yet though his will be iron, he cannot help now and then resuming his humanity or simianity in face of a fear." What Adams seems to be trying to say is that the truth is that the laws of history "only repeat the lines of force or thought." In any case, he apparently sees truth as multiple in the world of the practicing historian.

This analysis suggests that Adams was in the grip of a serious theoretical dilemma. He has already come close to the denial of any truth at all, but he shrinks back at the last instant and embraces a salutary myth that truth indeed exists, even though, on a purely intellectual level, he does not really believe it. In the preceding statement, he says that the historian must avoid seeking truth, for fear that commitment to his "truths" will compromise his honesty and cause him to falsify facts. This is Adams's statement of the fact-value distinction so central to much twentieth-century social science, which holds, properly enough, that the social scientist must try not to allow his values to influence his empirical conclusions. Put differently, Adams is saying that historians become committed to their discoveries in such a way as to blind them to contrary evidence. Of course, this is an ever-present danger for other social sciences as well. The argument is like the classic liberal position that no judge should preside over his own case. Thus Adams is theoretically debarred from seeking truth but is required by his understanding of the welfare of society to deny this prohibition, and so he "pretends" to seek truth anyway. Conversely, the fact-value distinction is impossible for him to abide, because his human nature requires him to cling to his values, his "truths," no matter what, even if they are without foundation. This is a very convoluted argument, though in the end, he falls back on the values and sense of reality that go with his instincts rather than with what his scientific rationalism teaches him to believe. Perhaps this is a source of his celebration of "irrationalism" in *Chartres*.

In spite of this seriously unsettled state of mind, Adams presses the case for a scientific philosophy of history. The first general foray is in his essay "The Tendency of History," a paper written in 1894 as a substitute for a formal presidential address to the American Historical Association, a message surely intended to tease its members. This is the most sober of his efforts along these lines, and it deals, in its fashion, with the problems inherent in
relating truth and values just discussed. “The Tendency of History” can best be seen as a prolegomenon to the dynamic theory of history Adams began to develop in the *Education*. This paper is essentially a warning to historians that if they are genuinely scientific, they will discover unsettling truths that may well cause them to run afoul of the authorities. Suppose, for example, that scientific analysis leads to the conclusion that the triumph of socialism is inevitable. Even if we assume that American universities would permit their professors to announce these findings, he questions whether Europe would be as liberal. “Would property, on which the universities depend, allow such freedom of instruction? Would the state suffer its foundation to be destroyed? Would society as now constituted tolerate the open assertion of a necessity which should affirm its approaching overthrow?” Or suppose we assume that the world would continue on its present course for another thousand years. No one would listen to that with satisfaction. Or lastly, suppose that science were to discover that there must be a reversion to the church and revealed religion; this would mean the suicide of science. If the world continues as it has for another fifty years, the hopes of labor would be destroyed. If society goes communist, it places itself in conflict with “the entire fabric of our social and political system.” The outlook is bleak. “If [the world] goes on, we must preach despair. If it goes back, it must deny and repudiate science. If it goes forward, round a circle which leads through communism, we must declare ourselves hostile to the property that pays us and the institutions we are bound in duty to support.”

These are not foolish concerns. Scholars often court trouble when they challenge the status quo. But then it is just as likely that they will be ignored as suffer retribution. And the range of choice that Adams offers, given the seemingly rigid determinism of his speculations, seems very limited. Of those choices, continued drift along current lines of development seems the most likely. Any observer of the history of the twentieth century knows that the results of such a development can be terrible, though not infrequent, although Adams seems to think this the least likely of the possibilities he suggests. In truth, though his warning is worth hearing, there is not much substance to this paper.

The dynamic theory itself, as developed in the *Education*, is considerably more interesting. As a historian, Adams continues to be preoccupied with change. He argues that a dynamic theory of history requires two forces, man and nature, acting and reacting on each other. This process is unending. “Man’s function as a force of nature was to assimilate other forces as he assimilated food. He called it the love of power.”
Adams skips lightly, though interestingly, over the history of the Western world until 1600. Here, Francis Bacon—Lord Bacon, as Adams likes to call him—enters the scene. Bacon made a simple, revolutionary proposal. Sounding like Marx turning Hegel upside down, “He urged society to lay aside the idea of evolving the universe from a thought, and to try evolving thought from the universe. . . . As Galileo reversed the action of earth and sun, Bacon reversed the relation of thought to force. The mind was henceforth to follow the movement of matter, and unity must be left to shift for itself.”20 Paradoxically, in the interest of mastery through the exercise of mind, the mind becomes subordinated to material forces.

Humans began to depend on forces not their own, and the results were exceedingly dramatic.

The microscope revealed a universe that defied the senses; gunpowder killed whole races that lagged behind; the compass coerced the most imbruted mariner to act on the impossible idea that the earth was round; the press drenched Europe with anarchism. Europe saw itself, violently resisting, wrenched into false positions; drawn along new lines as a fish that is caught on a hook; but unable to understand by what force it was controlled. The resistance was often bloody, sometimes humorous, always constant. Its contortions in the eighteenth century are best studied in the wit of Voltaire, but all history and all philosophy from Montaigne and Pascal to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche deal with nothing else; and still, throughout it all, the Baconian law held good; thought did not evolve nature, but nature evolved thought.21

The results of Bacon’s method are obviously remarkable. In its wake came an almost spontaneous influx of new forces. “As Nature developed her hidden energies, they tended to become destructive. Thought itself became tortured, suffering reluctantly, impatiently, painfully, the coercion of new method. Easy thought had always been movement of inertia, and mostly mere sentiment; but even the processes of mathematics measured feebly the needs of force.”22 The result of the entry of these new ideas into society was deeply troubling. “In the earlier stages of progress, the forces to be assimilated were simple and easy to absorb, but, as the mind of man enlarged its range, it enlarged the field of complexity, and must continue to do so, even unto chaos, until the reservoirs of sensuous or supersensuous energies are exhausted, or cease to affect him, or until he succumbs to their excess.”23

The great danger is the accelerating development of this new power. This
brings us to the heart of Adams’s theory of history. He returns again to the theme that his great concern is motion, but now he is interested in measuring it. He attempts this by examining the world’s coal output, which he tells us doubled every ten years between 1840 and 1900, with each ton of coal yielding three times as much power in 1900 as it did in 1840. Similar technological developments can be seen everywhere. What is at work is “a law of acceleration, definite and constant as any law of mechanics, [which] cannot be supposed to relax its energy to suit the convenience of man.” Fifty years before, he explains, no scientist believed that this rate of change could last. But they were wrong.

Two generations, with John Stuart Mill, talked of this stationary period, which was to follow the explosion of new power. All the men who were elderly in the forties died in this faith, and other men grew old nursing the same conviction, and happy in it; while science, for fifty years, permitted, or encouraged, society to think that force would prove to be limited in supply. This mental inertia of science lasted through the eighties before showing signs of breaking up; and nothing short of radium fairly wakened men to the fact long since evident, that force was inexhaustible. Even then the scientific authorities vehemently resisted.

“Nothing so revolutionary had happened since the year 300.” And Adams ominously adds the frightening thought that “impossibilities no longer stood in the way.”

The huge forces at work and the rapidity with which they changed created major problems even for the scientists. If current scientific notions of the universe were sound, men like Galileo, Descartes, Leibnitz, and Newton should have stopped scientific progress before 1700, assuming they were honest in their professed religious convictions. “In 1900 they were plainly forced back on faith in a unity unproved and an order they themselves had disproved. They had reduced their universe to a series of relations to themselves. They had reduced themselves to motion in a universe of motions, with an acceleration, in their own case, of vertiginous violence.”

In 1909, Adams wrote a paper “The Rule of Phase Applied to History,” explicitly conceived as a supplement to the Education, which attempted to make this line of thought more precise. In it he draws an analogy between the phases of a substance in chemistry—for instance, ice, water, and water vapor—and Auguste Comte’s phases of history. With his usual good sense, J. C. Levenson suggests that we forget about the chemistry and focus on the
analogy, though as a metaphor, the rule of phase has some use. Comte had defined three phases: the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive. Adams proposed to discard these labels while keeping the idea of phase. As always, he was interested in motion, that is, a change of direction that was equivalent to a change in form. These changes are caused by acceleration and an increase in volume or concentration. For Adams, the phase to start with was the great age of Bacon, Descartes, Galileo, and Columbus. Between 1500 and 1700, there was a definite change in the direction of the history of the Western world. This new phase embodied so great a change that it had no direct relationship to what preceded it. Society followed along the lines laid down in the early modern era until about 1840. The acceleration of change in this period was remarkable. And by focusing on the condemnation of Galileo in 1633, Adams suggests that this period might be dated roughly from 1600 to 1900, a time that he calls the Mechanical Phase. Adams then considers the problem of defining the boundaries of the earlier phase. Most historians would be inclined to pick the year 500 as a starting point because of the establishment of monotheism and of the Christian and Muslim faiths, though Adams is not sure that these events really entailed a change in direction. Indeed, from a scientific point of view, there was probably no significant change of phase from the beginning of history until Galileo was condemned. Through calculations later in the article, Adams concludes that this earlier Religious Phase, as he calls it, occupied no less than 90,000 years.

Adams then raises the question of when the Mechanical Phase ended. He believes that a change began around 1870 as the invention of the dynamo started to suggest a new era. The new generation trained after 1900 in the physics of electromagnetism and radiation might see that date as the beginning of a new period. The discovery of radium was as startling to the physicists grounded in classical mechanics as the discoveries of Galileo were to the church. This was the dawn of the Electric Phase, which, since the Mechanical Phase had lasted 300 years, had an expected life of about 17.5 years—the square root of 300. It is something of a mystery where the use of the square root comes from, since Adams does not explain it, but it probably derives from chemist Willard Gibbs's work on the rule of phase. The succeeding phase, the Ethereal, would last for the square root of 17.5, or about 4.2 years, which would "bring Thought to the limit of its possibilities in the year 1921." Adams adds, "It may well be!" Nothing, he says, is beyond probability. Even if the previous phase were to last another hundred years, in the long panorama of history, the difference would be negligible. Then the Ethereal Phase would
last until about 2025. This is obviously wildly speculative, but the central idea that the phases of historical development are being radically shortened seems more plausible.

If taken literally, much of this is manifestly nonsense, most obviously the notion that thought would reach its limit in 1921. It is hardly a cause for wonder that the American Historical Review refused to publish the paper when Adams submitted it. Nor does it add much to Adams's chapter on the law of acceleration in the Education. Certainly the article inadvertently illustrates the sheer silliness of trying to quantify huge historical changes with such a degree of specificity. But the article is not useless, in spite of these flaws. It helps capture something of the decisive change that occurred in early modern Europe and swept through the New World. As Levenson says, "Henry Adams insisted that men do die, that the Middle Ages were dead, and that the modern era was flirting with catastrophe, but he also argued that society had hitherto been immortal and could maintain itself now by a new leap of mind." Not the least striking of Adams's conclusions, and Levenson's, is that the Middle Ages are in some sense beside the point and that Chartres is therefore, in the grand scheme of Adams's thought, almost irrelevant, a beautiful memorial and a great work of art, but unfortunately of limited earthly use in the twentieth century. At most, it constitutes an aesthetic recoil from twentieth-century scientism. But "The Rule" and the concluding chapters of the Education show how much a part of the twentieth century Adams was, in spite of all his aesthetic protestations to the contrary. After all, he insists on pressing a scientific worldview. As usual, his thought exists in a state of high internal tension. Perhaps the most important implication of Adams's article is that there may be a limit to the human capacity to comprehend rapid change in time to be able to assert control over it. He was certainly not wrong to raise the question. It is, for example, not clear today that we truly understand the enormous changes, both social and technological, going on around us. Perhaps, like Adams, we must learn to embrace our uncertainties as we struggle to comprehend our own rapidly changing world.

However, before we return to the concluding pages of the Education, Adams's last major work, "A Letter to American Teachers of History," written in 1910, must be considered. Like "The Rule of Phase," it remained unpublished until after his death in 1918, when his brother Brooks brought these two papers together, along with "The Tendency of History," and released them to the public under the unfortunate and misleading title The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma. About this long essay it is harder to find positive things to say. Here Adams is even more insistent that history must be
treated as if it were a physical science and that the ruling physical law is the second law of thermodynamics, which holds that all the energy of the universe is slowly being dissipated. Again, if taken literally, the “Letter” arguably brings out the worst in Adams, except for his anti-Semitism. Even a sympathetic critic like Levenson writes, “The scientific figure he now elaborated had a tenor of its own which brought to expression the most desperate and perverse aspect of his personality.” His thinking had long flirted with despair, but until 1910, he had kept his worst fears private, being “more concerned with the dynamic theory of history than with a thermodynamic theory of calamity. The letter writer, on the other hand, was full of dire predictions that the world was going to smash.” In this essay, Adams the historian comes perilously close to abdicating the field to physicists. Harking back to the fears expressed in “The Tendency of History,” he says that if Lord Kelvin’s second law is true, “the American professor who should begin his annual course by announcing to his class that their year’s work would be devoted to showing in American history ‘a universal tendency to the dissipation of energy’ and degradation of thought, which would soon end in making America ‘improper for the habitation of men as he is now constituted,’ might not fear the fate of Giordano Bruno, but would certainly expect that of Galileo. . . . The University would have to protect itself by dismissing him.”

Though Adams grabs halfheartedly at some straws, he suggests that there is no real possibility of escape: “Man and beast can, at the best, look forward only to a diversified agony of twenty million years.” Conceding the worst, Adams says, “Science has shut and barred every known exit. Man can detect no outlet except through the loophole called Mind.” But then, in the last sentence, Adams holds out the dim hope for “another Newton” to find a way out. This last appeal to the possibility of a new Newton suggests that even in the deep gloom of the “Letter,” Adams never quite gives in to an entirely deterministic position; he continues to look for, or at least hope for, some escape route. In this sense, the “loophole” has some significance. Adams is never entirely willing to give up on mind.

These stirrings of hope are only signs of desperation, looking back to earlier times when Adams hoped that new thought would help save the nation and the world. Adams, unlike so many nineteenth-century thinkers, was never a historical optimist, but the near total despair in the late scientific essays runs counter to the ideas he expressed throughout most of his career, at least in his published work. But in “The Rule,” and even more in “A Letter,” these fleetingly hypothesized ways of escape run directly counter to the logic and the rhetoric of the main argument. Adams suppressed “The Rule,” which
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was published only after his death, and “A Letter,” which was privately printed and circulated to historians, was read by very few. One who did was William James. Writing to his old friend virtually from his deathbed, his comments were devastating.

“To tell the truth, it doesn’t impress me at all save by its wit and erudition; and I ask you whether an old man soon about to meet his Maker can hope to save himself from the consequences of his life by pointing to the wit and learning he has shown in treating a tragic subject. No, sir, you can’t do it, can’t impress God in that way.” James conceded the inescapability of the second law “in the present state of scientific conventions and fashions” but protested the “interpretation . . . of the great statistical drift downwards of the original high-level of energy . . . To begin with, the amount of cosmic energy it costs to buy a certain distribution of fact which humanly we regard as precious, seems to me to be an altogether secondary matter as regards the question of history and progress.” A dinosaur’s brain may have been as good an exchanger of physical energy as man’s but it could not “issue proclamations, write books, describe Chartres Cathedral, etc.” “The second law is wholly irrelevant to ‘history’—save that it sets its terminus.” There was therefore “nothing in physics to interfere with the hypothesis that the penultimate state might be the millennium.”

No one has ever stated the case against the “Letter” better. The only thing possible to add is that when we consider the twenty million years Adams gives us, it is appropriate to remember Lord Keynes’s immortal quip that in the long run we are all dead. And the long run Adams concedes us is very long indeed. The folly of simply giving in to determinism in a time frame that covers twenty million years needs no further comment. Still, it should be remarked that by addressing his thoughts to historians, Adams was writing to a group, many of whose members were Darwinians, only too ready to give in to that form of determinism, a mode of thought Adams had decisively rejected.

The best line of defense Adams had against critics was to pass the whole thing off as a joke or as an attack on socialism. He admitted to Charles Milnes Gaskell that he did not really know if our energy was declining and alluded to the thought that the larger subject of the “Letter” was socialism. There are other similar suggestions in the correspondence, but this argument is not very convincing. As William Merrill Decker writes, “The book becomes an anti-socialist tract only through such generalized reading—or, to cite a practice traditionally deplored by the Adamses, such loose construction—as must render unimportant the terms and argumentative lines that Adams did adopt.”
The idea that the book was a joke was also somewhat feeble. The “fun” was that his colleagues could not understand it, and Adams admits that even he probably would not have seen “the joke myself if I were not its author.” More plausibly, one must suppose that these essays were a general assault on evolutionary theorists who still thought in terms of inevitable progress. On this level, Adams’s position is eminently defensible, as much of his earlier work shows. It is a pity that, as Perry Miller wrote, “These essays incarnate those elements of perversity, affectation, parade of erudition, assumption of intellectual superiority, and downright irresponsibility which make Adams both fascinating and exasperating. . . . They constitute the furthest any American went toward erecting against the evolutionary and pragmatic idea a rigid system within which the heavens themselves might be confined. . . . The intention . . . is to demolish the overeasy optimism which lies at the heart of most varieties of Darwinism.” Read in this light, Adams’s paper can be seen as a critique of the idea of inevitable progress that is both valuable and important.

These late essays obviously present a major interpretive problem. Taken literally, they are very weak. But it is important to remember Adams’s love of irony. If we read them in this light, it must be said that the irony is heavy-handed and obscure. A joke that has to be explained after the fact even to close friends well versed in the eccentricities of the teller is not a very good joke. If Adams’s intent was humorous, one must say that it is possible to ridicule the fallacies of a rigid determinist philosophy more clearly and with a lighter hand. Consider Mark Twain’s hilarious essay “The Turning Point of My Life,” also published in 1910, two months before the author’s death. In it, he explains how he became a writer and constructs a web of determining forces that extends back to Adam and Eve. The satire, unlike Adams’s, is impossible to miss.

It is not possible to rate the dynamic theory of history as a success. But it is necessary to admire Adams’s desperate attempt to come to grips with the enormous importance of modern science. Science is so much a part of our world that it cannot be ignored. The quest that Adams began so early still goes on. Consider a recent essay by William McNeill:

During the twentieth century the physical sciences converged with biology in transforming the Newtonian world machine governed by eternal, universal, and mathematical laws into an evolving—indeed exploding—cosmos where uncertainty prevails, and human efforts at observation affect what is observed. This brings the mathematical sciences closer to the social sciences, and turns history into another kind of black hole from which no branch of knowledge can escape.
Adams might well have written these words, and his effort to come to terms with such problems while clinging to his humanistic inclinations can only be called admirable—even intellectually heroic—in spite of the fact that the attempt is ultimately a failure.

I argue that the essays collected in Degradation of the Democratic Dogma are only loosely connected to the main body of Adams’s work, the connecting link being his lifelong interest in science and his unsuccessful attempt to find unity in history. They are steeped in a rigid determinism that Adams flirted with, but tried to resist, throughout his career. Thus 1910 marks a turning point; prior to then, “the much vaunted pessimism of Henry Adams found expression in his personal correspondence rather than what he wrote for circulation.” It is true that in his late letters he was depressed, self-pitying at times, and often bitter. But his friends knew how to discount for his hyperbole, and contemporary commentators would do well to follow their lead. The hope that keeps breaking out in his published work through the Education is better expressed—somewhat offhandedly, to be sure—in a 1911 letter to Brooks saying that he “looked forward with consternation to the possibilities of a pessimistic America. Pessimism without ideas,—a sort of bankrupt trust,—will be the most harrowing form of ennui the world has ever known.” Adams desperately wants to hold on to his sense of this essentially American optimism in spite of himself. The papers published in Degradation of the Democratic Dogma are his last works, but the true climax of his career is the Education. The late essays are essentially a reductio ad absurdum of his long-standing interest in science expressed there and elsewhere. It is therefore appropriate to return to that book and move toward a summary discussion of Adams’s work.

The Meaning of an Education

Adams’s letters to William James and Whitelaw Reid would lead one to expect the final chapter of the Education to be closely connected to the dynamic theory of history and to the concluding chapter of Chartres. But this is not the case. The concluding chapter has a valedictory quality captured in its title—“Nunc Age,” now go. It is not really about his scientific philosophy of history at all. He now tells us that dispute about the dynamic theory is idle; “it would verify or disprove itself within thirty years.” However annoying it might be to those players still in the game, “it tended to encourage foresight and to economize waste of mind,” even if it was “profoundly unmoral and tended to discourage effort.” Though it was not itself education, “it pointed
out the economies necessary for the education of the new American. There, the duty stopped.” Adams comments briefly on the problem of controlling the trusts, as we have already seen, and then on the physical decline and death of John Hay. He lauds Hay for having solved nearly every problem in American statesmanship, but he cannot resist yet another dig at the Senate, which held up a dozen treaties “like lambs in a butcher shop.” Forgetting his dire warnings about a coming European crisis, he claims that due to the efforts of Hay, “for the first time in fifteen hundred years a true Roman pax was in sight.” The only alternative to Hay’s scheme was world war. (Whether or not the Hay peace had a chance, it was, of course, the catastrophe rather than the peace that occurred.)

Alluding to Hamlet, Adams sighs, “the rest is silence.” Shortly after their last meeting, Hay died. For Adams, it is the end of an age. As his chapter title suggests, he feels that it is time to go. But he allows himself one last wistful hope, a fantasy. Thinking of Hay and Clarence King, both now dead, he writes:

Education had ended for all three, and only beyond some remoter horizon could its values be fixed or renewed. Perhaps some day—say 1938, their centenary—they might be allowed to return together for a holiday, to see the mistakes of their own lives made clear in the light of the mistakes of their successors; and perhaps then, for the first time since man began his education among the carnivores, they would find a world that sensitive and timid natures could regard without a shudder.

But of course, the dream could never have come to pass. The year 1938 turned out to be a very bad one indeed, and much worse was to come. It was not his faint hopes but the catastrophes he foresaw that engulfed the world. And of course, Adams’s restless mind was not yet ready to declare education to be entirely at an end. The scientific essays were still to come. The product might not have been very satisfying, but the mind continued to work. But if Adams was not quite ready to go, he was ready for those who cared to be his students to build on his education and become leaders in a rapidly changing world. This didactic purpose was clearly stated in his preface to the Education, where he lays down the goal of all good teachers and explains what he hopes for from his students. “At the utmost, the active-minded young man should ask of his teacher only the mastery of his tools. The young man himself, the subject of education, is a certain form of energy; the object to be gained is economy of his force; the training is partly the clearing away of
obstacles, partly the direct application of effort. Once acquired, the tools and models may be thrown away." This seems to be another meaning of the "Now Go" injunction, this time addressed to those who were willing to be taught by him.

What then did Adams hope to teach? Like T. S. Eliot, his end was in his beginning. The wistful fantasy of a return to a better world in 1938 is, according to Ernest Samuels, "a deliberate return to the mood of the first chapter, to the idealization of Quincy." This is the basic moral of the Education. "Not the coarse and predatory immoralism of the financial districts but the idealism of Quincy would delight the sensitive nature with which he was born and which he liked to think was shared by his two closest friends." It is also worth noting that for all the pull of determinism in Adams's thought, a determinism to which he appears to surrender almost completely in the "Letter," in his last truly major statement, he ends on a hopeful note, however wan it may be. Whatever the temptation, Adams could never quite surrender his mind to any scheme of absolute determinism. Perhaps no determinist ever does. Consider the case of Marx: If revolution is preordained, why take the trouble to be a revolutionary? It would surely be easier to sit back and wait for the inevitable to happen. But of course, even determinists tend to believe, with Mr. Justice Holmes, that the mode by which the inevitable comes to pass is through effort.

Naturally, the question arises as to the extent to which Adams's readers will be educated by his autobiographical reflections. I think that we can easily dismiss the recurring idea that Adams's own education was a failure. In fact, the whole work stands as impressive testimony to the possibility of a lifelong education, constantly adjusting to ever-changing conditions. One can disagree with many things he has to say, but no one could possibly miss the fact that Adams was supremely well educated, by life and by study. The frequently adopted pose of Socratic ignorance was just that—a pose. Like Socrates, he was well aware that few readers would be able to challenge him on his own level. Thus, among his contemporaries, it took a William James to offer the most penetrating comments on the privately circulated edition of the Education.

Adams was fully aware of the difficulties his book presented. Writing to Barrett Wendell, he establishes the standard he sets for himself and suggests the nature of the formal experiment he has undertaken. "When I read St. Augustine's Confessions, or Rousseau's, I feel certain that their faults, as literary artists, are worse than mine. We have all three undertaken to do what cannot be successfully done—mix narrative and didactic purpose and style.
The charm of the effort is not winning the game but in playing it. . . . And I found that a narrative style was so incompatible with a didactic or scientific style, that I had to write a long supplementary chapter to explain in scientific terms what I could not put into narration without ruining the narrative.”

Here, while putting his finger on a serious problem, Adams attempts to preempt criticism by noting the failure of other, even greater writers to accomplish what he set out to do. It may also be useful to note the supreme arrogance with which in assessing this “failure” he asserts his superiority to both Augustine and Rousseau. Some failure!

The basic problem in Adams’s approach is beautifully captured by William James in a letter to Adams that, according to Samuels, caused Adams some misgivings. Again, James is one of Adams’s most searching critics. His deserves to be quoted at length:

The boyhood part is really superlative. It and the London part should become classic historic documents. . . . There is a hodge-podge of world-fact, private fact, philosophy, irony, (with the word “education” stirred in too much for my appreciation!) which gives a unique cachet to the thing and gives a very pleasant gesamt-eindruck of H. A’s Self. A great deal of the later diplomatic history is dealt with so much by hint and implication, that to an ignoramus like W. J. it reads obscurely. . . . I don’t follow or share your way of conceiving the historical problem as the determination of a curve by points. I think that applies only to what is done and over. . . . But unless the future contains genuine novelties, unless the present is really creative of them, I don’t see the use of time at all. Space would be a sufficient theatre for these statistically determined relations to be arranged in.

For all the genuine praise, the last point, if sound, is a truly damning criticism, for without time, there can be no history, and Adams’s perpetual stress on motion would be seriously undermined. The point also continued to worry James, for in 1909 he returns to it in an appendix to A Pluralistic Universe called “The Notion of Reality as Changing.” His general point is that “remoter effects are seldom aimed at by causal intentions.” He then turns to Adams, though not mentioning him by name.

A friend of mine has an idea, which illustrates on such a magnified scale the impossibility of tracing the same line through reality, that I will mention it here. He thinks that nothing more is needed to make history “scientific” than to get the content of any two epochs (say the end of the thirteenth and the end of the nineteenth century) accurately
defined, from the one epoch into the other, then accurately to define
the nature of the change that led from the one epoch into the other,
and finally to prolong the line of that direction into the future. So pro­
longing the line, he thinks, we ought to be able to define the actual
state of things at any future date we please. We all feel the essential
unreality of such a conception of “history” as this, [but if a pluralistic
universe of the sort Bergson, Peirce, and I believe in really exists], every
phenomenon of development, even the simplest, would prove equally
rebellious to our science should the latter pretend to give us literally
accurate instead of approximate, or statistically generalized, pictures
of the development of reality.37

This is a very serious criticism of an allegedly “dynamic” theory of his­
tory. Interestingly, it does not seem to apply to the historical account of the
Jefferson and Madison administrations, which is characterized by such rich
detail and so intense a focus on events that move in directions not intended
by the actors, who are caught up in forces beyond their control and who do
not achieve the ends aimed at by their causal intentions, that it seems eas­
ily to surmount James’s strictures on the dynamic theory and the projection
from the unity of Chartres to the multiplicity of the Education. But what
will work for a sixteen-year period will not work over many centuries. Thus,
as history, it is Adams’s earlier masterpiece that is far more successful than
his late speculations.

This does not mean, however, that the comparison between the twelfth
and twentieth centuries is of no value for Adams, or necessarily for us. As I
have noted, Adams is willing deliberately to suppress much history in order to
create what is essentially a utopian aesthetic vision of medieval order. In this
context, a reader might or might not find the utopia attractive. Roman
Catholics might find it heretical, as Adams well knew. But for all that, some
see Adams as a hidebound conservative. I repeat that the Virgin’s sympathy
for ordinary people and the victims of injustice and her distrust of authority
might well find a sympathetic hearing on the Left, though I certainly do not
claim that this is Adams’s intended audience or that he himself should be
placed on the left of the political spectrum. In fact, his intent, particularly
when Chartres and the Education are assessed together, as he insisted they
should be, is not altogether clear. The two works seem to be in some signif­
icant tension with each other, a tension that once again reveals deep ambi­
guity within Adams’s thought.

It may be that he hoped to reconcile these ambiguities in the Education,
but if so, he did not succeed. First of all, in Chartres, there is his flamboyant
disregard of mere fact, which might testify to what Samuels calls “his funda­mental quarrel with science.” It certainly testifies to a powerfully developed aesthetic sense that resulted in a book of great beauty and reads as a challenge to positivist history. And yet the Virgin, who stands for Adams’s ideals in that volume, disappears in the last three chapters, on which Adams placed so much emphasis. The conclusion points to a beautiful but unstable equi­librium in which science, fostered even by Thomas Aquinas, has achieved the upper hand in a world in which the church, by Adams’s lights, is already dead. Aside from this, it is hard to read the late “scientific” papers and accept the idea that Adams saw them as simply a joke, no matter what defenses he threw up in his letters. They express a commitment to science, even if that commitment is based only on the frequent theme of swimming with the current of one’s own time; thus, in the Education and after, Adams adopts a scientific view of the world. But at the same time, Adams does not renounce Chartres and insists that the two great masterpieces stand together. It will not do to let the later book simply displace the former. This tension is the mark of a divided thinker in dialogical conflict with himself. This complex relation­ship can be resolved only in a more general conclusion, which must await a further assessment of the Education.

As for the Education, it is interesting to reflect further on the relation of its conclusion to Adams’s preface. The fact that the text itself was privately cir­culated in 1907, eleven years before its first public appearance following Adams’s death in 1918, suggests that it was open to debate up to that time, and I suggest that it still should be read as if it were a tentative rather than a dogmatic document, though it was not revised prior to its posthumous pub­lication. The concluding chapters of the book suggest resignation before forces beyond his control, but the early chapters stress the reformist impulses that Adams shared with his whole family. As Decker puts it, “If the Educa­tion reflects the lifelong disabusal of Henry Adams, it does so against the depiction of his own bygone youthful attitude that the world exists to be reformed.” He remains “more or less” sympathetic to youth. The preface can be read as a countermove to the bleakness of the dynamic theory of history, a “statement of faith: an afterword that breaks with the overwhelmingly deter­ministic logic of the dynamic theory, that affirms youthful effort in the face of a denuded, dehumanized, de-creating cosmos.” In this light, it is possi­ble to see the preface as an invitation to pick up the cause of reform, in spite of the dynamic theory and in spite of his own refusal to do so. Here, as in his rather feeble appeal for a new Newton, Adams seems to suggest that what we need is imaginative new thinking to match the dramatic new ideas and
events of the early twentieth century. The implication is that theory is logically prior to policy and that, as Hannah Arendt used to argue, it is necessary to stop and think what we are doing.

But Decker, giving due recognition to the complexity of Adams’s mind, argues that there is another possible reading of the 1907 preface. He observes that in his correspondence Adams shows little faith in the ability of future generations to learn from him; he does not, in fact, have much hope of finding an audience. Read this way, Decker sees the preface as a “belligerent” statement to what Adams was sure would be an uncomprehending audience. However, I do not read the tone of the preface as belligerent, but rather as something that challenges his readers to learn what they can, acquire the tools of analysis, come to an understanding of history, and then strike off on their own to struggle against the forces Adams identifies. He may feel that the challenge will not be accepted or, if it is accepted, that those who do so will succumb in the end to the superior forces of modern society. But still, a positive reading of the preface is consistent with Adams’s refusal, down to the last paragraph of the *Education*, to surrender completely to the dynamics of the rapidly changing society.

Decker is certainly right that there is a tension here, and elsewhere in Adams’s work as well. As his letters show, Adams was aware of this problem in the *Education*, most notably in the conflict between his narrative and didactic purposes. Although many have argued the contrary, the book is not well unified, a reflection perhaps of the loss of unity and the rise of twentieth-century multiplicity. Nor do “The Rule” or “A Letter” help very much. Next to the *Education*, they are rigid and intellectually negligible, a minor appendix to Adams’s work. All they can do is indicate that part of his complex mind was filled with a powerful, if in the end not very useful, scientific component. But as Decker suggests, that “irresolution” makes the “book all the more dynamic, all the more insistently a reader’s book.” The conflicts within Adams’s work invite a variety of responses. Like all major writers, he stimulates a wide range of reflections. The interpretive problem is similar to that encountered in discussing the possibility that he can be read as sympathetic to a critical leftist position, one not completely resistant to twentieth-century multiplicity. Once again, this should not be taken to mean that any interpretation of the *Education* will suffice. No one can make Adams a proponent of modern mass democracy or a celebrant of unfettered technological development. But it does mean, as Decker says, that “any committed reading of the work should aspire to some purpose and unity on its own terms, along the lines of the reader’s preference.” Adams himself gives a certain license to
his interpreters, saying, "No one means all he says, and yet very few say all they mean, for words are slippery and thought is viscous." I agree with Decker's preferred reading, which "finds the book's nihilism decidedly mitigated." This is an example of a fruitful interpretation built on a palpable tension in Adams's thought. And my own reading aspires to a unity that paradoxically stresses the ultimate lack of unity in Adams.

With all this in mind, we still have a great deal to learn, not only from the *Education* but from all of Adams's work. But particularly in the *Education*, he does not make it easy for the reader, as William James so rightly observed. Adams himself is clearly aware of the problem, which stems, at least in part, from the difficulty of integrating his dual commitments to both narrative and didactic purposes. The first two-thirds of the book are not too problematic in this respect. However, the argument of the remainder tends to move by fits and starts. Personal history is often interrupted by theoretical reflections, with the result that neither seems quite complete. It is frequently necessary to factor out the theory and the autobiography into separate parts, so that in this case, it can be a virtue to lift arguments out of their immediate context in pursuit of a clear presentation of ideas in a larger context. It is rather like trying to piece two jigsaw puzzles simultaneously, with the additional complication that the two are closely linked. I have been focusing on the puzzle presented by the philosophy of history. But now I return to his interpretation of American history, politics, and society, out of which the philosophy grows.

**History and Politics in the Education**

The *Education* is certainly an invitation to revisit and rethink the course of American history, though for this purpose, it needs to be read in conjunction with his history of the Jefferson and Madison administrations and the journalism as well. The invitation may seem to come from on high, and in this day and age, it may seem to be insufferably elitist, not least because at times it is. Still, Adams is a learned and well-placed guide with a unique perspective matched, perhaps, only by one of his intellectual mentors, Alexis de Tocqueville. I think we must learn to set aside his elitist tone and instead attend carefully to what he has to say. It is his attainments and arguments and not his upper-class background that earn him the right to be heard, even if, as with any writer, we need to discount for the obvious and sometimes troubling biases that stem from his background.

Levenson makes a sweeping claim. "Henry Adams offers to his fellow
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Americans the richest and most challenging image of what they are, what they have been, and what they may become.\(^66\) This may seem a bit much, but probably only Tocqueville is a real rival to this claim. James Bryce's *American Commonwealth* is wonderfully descriptive but lacks theory, and since it is so heavily descriptive, it is dated. Among modern works, Louis Hartz's *Liberal Tradition in America* is theoretically brilliant but arguably too narrowly focused, and it lacks historical detail. Richard Hofstadter's large body of work has the detail and offers powerful middle-range theories, but he lacks the historical sweep of Hartz, a fact that makes Hofstadter's early death all the more tragic, since we were denied his projected three-volume magnum opus. Many have tried to displace Hartz, but no one has succeeded beyond forcing modifications of his theory of a hegemonic liberalism. In any event, no one can say that his theory is not rich and challenging. As for Tocqueville, he is more theoretically coherent than Adams, but Adams has the advantage of seventy more years of the American experience on which to base his observations. Thus he saw the rise of machine politics, the explosion of industrial and financial capitalism, and the dramatic growth of science and technology that came after Tocqueville's brief visit to America.

Adams sees most of these developments as either unhealthy or ambiguous in their impact, and therefore problematic. He looks at the urban machine in much the same negative light as did the reformers of the Progressive movement, though he does not comment directly on their reforms. His discussion of machine politics is marred by his inability to see the positive contributions political parties can make to modern democracies, since Adams, with three generations of family party irregularity behind him, had no talent for partisan politics and no understanding of the function of party in a mass democracy.

In addition, the corruption of politics was closely associated in his mind with the rapid development of modern capitalism after the Civil War. This development was subversive of any decent democracy as Adams understood the term, a development that more than fulfilled Tocqueville's warning of the rise of a harsh aristocracy of manufacturers.\(^67\) To Tocqueville's fears, Adams added his own hatred of banking and high finance. He was right to identify these as powerful and dangerous forces but horribly misguided in identifying them with an imaginary Jewish menace. But, as I have said, his noxious anti-Semitism came late in life, long after his intense dislike of capitalism emerged. This dark stain cannot be ignored, but his critique of capitalism is largely independent of it. It is also important that Adams identified a link between corrupt economic and political forces that has proved to be endemic in the United States. It may be salutary to look at contemporary
American politics in this light. Political and economic corruption may be more subtle in contemporary America than in the nineteenth century, but it is no less in evidence. It begins to look like a permanent condition of American politics rather than some sort of passing aberration. One must seriously consider the possibility that it is deeply embedded in the economy, politics, and culture of the United States, in which case the relevance of Henry Adams to our condition is all the more clear. We are confronted with a need, in the terms of Michael Walzer, to find a way to separate the legitimate spheres of money and politics so as to reduce the influence of political money, a separation that is necessary for the achievement of a just society.

Adams is also prescient on the problems of technology. It is positively eerie that as early as 1862 he raised the possibility that we would have the capacity to blow up the world. But of course, this may have been just a lucky shot in the dark. Nevertheless, it is technology, undergirded by science, that is the driving force of much of the dynamic theory of history. Again, Adams has a divided mind. On the one hand, he finds technology amazing, amusing, and enjoyable. On the other, he sees the danger that it may go out of control. This situation has changed little since Adams wrote. Enormous numbers of people have had their lives improved, or in fact saved, by technological advances. At the same time, equally enormous numbers have had their lives threatened by, for example, environmental degradation. And the dangers of nuclear weapons have only recently receded into the background; they could easily come to the fore again. The Senate’s defeat of President Clinton’s nuclear test agreement only makes this more likely. And the great political issue remains unsolved. How are we to exert human control over the forces unleashed by technology? Technocratic elites are often effectively in charge, though without the education Adams wished for the new American, an education oriented not only toward science and technology but also toward humanistic systems of controlling them. The need is for a politics of technology, a politics that can impose human authority on technological development. These problems open up larger questions that can best be addressed in the context of an overview of the whole corpus of Adams’s work.

A Complex Mind in a Complex World

One of the most insistently sounded themes in the Education is Adams’s labeling of his education, and indeed his whole career, as a failure. Can this self-assessment stand? Or is it merely a rhetorical ploy on Adams’s part? By any reasonable standard, it must be the latter. The only way to classify
Adams as a failure is to accept the exalted standards of the Adams family, which, as Adams knew from boyhood, suggested the possibility of his becoming president. But one can hardly call him a failure for not achieving what he never attempted. Of course, given his personality, he probably would have failed as a politician had he tried, but that is a separate issue, as is the question of whether he would have been successful in the office. Probably Adams's own sense that he was unfit for politics is correct, though a high diplomatic position might well have been appropriate for him. For the rest, if we look at what he did accomplish, failure is anything but the right term; in fact, the alleged failure is simply a "myth," a myth that suits Adams's analytical purposes. In making this point, William Dusinberre takes an unusual tack, contending that there is a considerable falling off of Adams's powers after 1890, a decline of "mental vigor," as he puts it.  

Dusinberre's judgment strikes me as too harsh. I believe Chartres to be almost flawless on its own terms, though I do accept that the last third of the Education is, for the reasons I have suggested, less successful than what goes before. But Dusinberre's reading has the considerable advantage of calling attention to the greatness of the monumental study of Jefferson and Madison, which he considers to be Adams's finest achievement and certainly the greatest American work of history. Of course, as he recognizes, over a hundred years of new research and the development of new interpretive perspectives inevitably undermine some of Adams's conclusions. However, its mixture of art and science, its masterful use of primary sources, its portrait of Jefferson, its analysis of a critical period in the early history of the United States, and its well-defined, if complex, critical position make it a tremendous masterpiece. However great the more famous Education, the History and Chartres are Adams's most perfectly realized works. To this day, as I suggested at the outset, the History illustrates Judith Shklar's argument that "narrative history, informed by philosophical and social analysis and a critical spirit, remains our likeliest route to political understanding." A hint of its utility is suggested in a fascinating study by Richard Neustadt and Ernest May. Their book is an outgrowth of a course the two taught together for many years at Harvard, in which historical case studies were used for the analysis of decision making by political leaders. Classing the History with books "by writers who were primarily historians but whose experience or observation were enough to give them something of an insider's perceptiveness," they place Adams in a category with Machiavelli, Macaulay, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and call the History a study from which men in power might benefit. Adams certainly belongs on
this list, though one must say that the omission of Thucydides is inexplicable. One could also add Tocqueville. But the general point is certainly valid.

Granting that only the application of an extremely high standard can justify calling Adams a failure, how can we sum up his contribution? What is his place in the history of American thought? Given the complexity of his ideas and the sometimes indirect, unsystematic way they are expressed, it is difficult to pin a label on him. In fact, perhaps one of his virtues is that the range of his thought is so wide and his imagination so fertile that he transcends the standard categories. Perhaps we should say that, like Walt Whitman, he contains multitudes.

Let us consider some of the possibilities somewhat more fully than we did earlier. It is clear that Adams, so often treated as a conservative, is not a Federalist, the most conservative party in the early years of the Republic about which he wrote so much. The Federalists, after all, were based in New England, with a strong outpost in New York, and were the hated enemies of the Adams family. However great the reservations Henry Adams had about Thomas Jefferson, he certainly thought that Jefferson was at least superior to Alexander Hamilton.

In the early national period, the principal alternative to the Federalists was the Republican Party of Thomas Jefferson. However, Adams cannot be said to have seized that alternative either. There is no doubt that Jefferson and Adams shared deep personal and characterological affinities: shyness, refinement, intellectual brilliance, a love of speculation, and a certain distaste for the rough and tumble of politics, though Jefferson often managed to rise above that distaste in ways that Adams found disreputable. Adams is at his most sympathetic to democracy in the 1880s when he was writing the *History* and his novel *Democracy*. In the former, it is Jefferson who is the spokesman for democracy. But in spite of this, it is necessary to point out again that Adams was a constitutional purist and a strict moralist who believed that Jefferson betrayed his principles in not seeking a constitutional amendment to support the Louisiana Purchase. In addition, the embargo was a policy disaster that greatly increased national power in such a way as to subvert Jefferson’s decentralist principles. So in spite of his sympathy, Jefferson was too flawed for Adams to join the ranks of his supporters. Yet Adams is quite clear that his model American statesman is that eminent Jeffersonian Albert Gallatin, so perhaps it is the leader rather than the abandoned principles that is at fault.

There are also certain affinities with the Whig Party, notably, support for
internal improvements, but Adams has little to say about them, and there is no evidence to put him into that camp.

He should have been a Lincolnian Republican, but he was not. Lincoln’s policy of slow strangulation of slavery by refusing to allow its expansion was very close to the policy of Charles Francis Adams, but it appears that sheer prejudice against Lincoln’s midwestern origins and his alleged lack of the social graces, along with his willingness to play patronage politics, poisoned Adams’s mind against him. Only late in life did he quietly recognize Lincoln’s greatness.81

By rights, he should also have been part of the Progressive movement. His journalism following the Civil War was one of the first great muckraking efforts, which were part of the foundation on which the movement was built. And it is worth noting that Brooks Adams, so close to Henry, was also very close to Theodore Roosevelt. But Adams was scornful of Roosevelt, thinking he displayed far too much energy in proportion to the thought behind his policies. And he failed to develop his implied, but very briefly stated, critique of Roosevelt’s trust policy. The trust crisis passed “when J. P. Morgan seized the initiative from Roosevelt, efficiently mobilized his Wall Street satellites, and rescued the securities markets, giving Adams arresting evidence of the accelerating concentration of economic power and of his fatalistic theory that Roosevelt’s trust-busting tactics were worse than useless.” From this, in the end, he drew the bizarre conclusion that McKinleyism was the “most beneficent evil” and that “tinkering was no substitute for root and branch measures.”82 Finally, by the time the Progressives took power, Adams was well into the pursuit of his gloomy theory of historical dynamics, which left little time for politics, except insofar as his energies went into attempts to influence John Hay’s foreign policy when the time seemed propitious; not much time was left for domestic issues. Given his hatred of the trusts, his failure to engage with the Progressives must be counted as a lost opportunity.83

This covers most of the more organized political possibilities with which Adams might have had an affinity. He did flirt briefly with the Populists in 1896, and one might have expected him to admire William Jennings Bryan’s Cross of Gold speech, whose rhetoric on the subject of banks was as flamboyant as his own. But the Populist flirtation did not survive past 1896.

Nor, in spite of his glorification of women in Chartres, in “The Primitive Rights of Women,” and in his correspondence, could Adams identify himself with feminism in any modern sense. The place for women, in his view, was not in the voting booth but in the home, where they could be the heart and soul of the family, imparting their superior moral wisdom to their hus-
bands and children. While there are contemporary feminists who might accept the claim of the moral superiority of women, none would be prepared to give up the right to vote, and none, I am sure, would accept the idea that women are by nature irrational, even if their thought patterns are revealed to be different from those of men. Perhaps the feminist theorists closest to Adams would be those who, like Jean Elshtain, place the strong family at the center of their thought.89

Modern conservatives have also paid little heed to Adams. It is true that Russell Kirk liked his work, but as I have said, he seems to have been misled by Brooks Adams's title *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*. Among other modern conservative thinkers, Leo Strauss admired him, but his student Allan Bloom dismissed him as a "crank,"85 and one does not often see his views reflected in the writings of other conservative thinkers. On the other side of the political equation, Adams has appealed to some on the Left, including the journalist Carey McWilliams, who entitled his autobiography *The Education of Carey McWilliams*, and the communitarian participatory democrat John Schaar.86 Both engage in a moral critique of contemporary capitalist democracy. But in the end, Adams is simply too complex to be adopted with ease by any political movement, and least of all by most contemporary conservatives, who are, for the most part, in thrall to the capitalism Adams despised.

Perhaps the historical category that comes closest to explaining Adams is, as Russell Hanson and William Merriman suggest, the civic republicanism discovered in the founding period by Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood, and most fully theorized by J. G. A. Pocock.87 This classification has real plausibility and is the most successful attempt to date to place Adams in the general context of American political thought. Civic republicanism is based on the idea that the foundation of the good society and political system is the active, virtuous citizen led by virtuous public officials. Virtue is defined as the willingness to subordinate private to public interests. Corruption is the antithesis of virtue, the readiness to pursue private interests at the expense of what is objectively best for the public. Civic republicanism is not an individualistic theory; the focus is on the community and its well-being as a whole. In contemporary debates over the origins of American politics, it is often viewed as the antithesis of liberalism. The distinction has been stated concisely, if too formulaically, by Harvey Mansfield, Jr. "Civic humanism," he tells us, "is the republican virtue of citizens participating in rule," while liberalism, in contrast, "favors rights over community, liberty over duty, representation over participation, and interest over virtue."88
Adams fits at least parts of this formula. Considering the above antitheses, he would embrace the idea of community, the stress on duty, and virtue as the antithesis of corruption, but he would not be so enthusiastic about the republican theory of participatory democracy. What he hopes is that under the leadership of enlightened representatives and writers like himself, citizens would choose public-spirited men to look after their fortunes. His is a deferential theory of representative democracy. It is this form of democracy that he believed was threatened by the widespread corruption accompanying the explosive development of late-nineteenth-century capitalism. But as was the case with the disasters in the War of 1812, the fault lay more with political and economic elites than with the people, who, he believed, were still sound, in spite of the disastrously bad representatives they had placed in office. In the desperation of his late years, this faith was to decline, but it was still evident in his major works, and it sometimes resurfaced in his letters.

It is also important to bear in mind that Adams's own self-identification, early and late, is as a liberal, not as a conservative. Remember that at the start of his career he listed Tocqueville and Mill as his patron saints, though at the end he despaired of this form of liberalism. Thus his lament is for the unrealized ideals of the nineteenth-century liberalism of his mentors. There is an obvious paradox here. Adams is attached to orthodox, liberal, capitalist market economics through much of his career. Partly this is due to fear of paternalism and the strong state, but it is also due to his belief in the essential soundness of the market system. The paradox lies, of course, in the similar attachment of the capitalists Adams despised to that same orthodoxy, an intellectual prison that contributed so much to the destruction of all that Adams loved. Markets are indispensable institutions for economic decision making, but unregulated markets raise the specter of oligopoly or monopoly and of the worst sort of factionalism and corruption in the strict republican sense of self-interest subversive of any meaningful public interest. Adams understood this but was unable to act on his perception.

In sum, Adams clung to the old republican component of his ideals longer than most, but like many American political intellectuals, going back to the Framers of the Constitution, his ideas in the end were a none too consistent mixture of civic humanism, liberalism, and, in his case, a residual Puritanism. It is also worth noting the now conventional position that, based on James Madison's theory of the role of faction in the Constitution, the document underwrote the very factions that led to self-interested politics. Again, given Adams’s constitutional purism, there is irony here, all the more so because the nationalism Adams favored virtually required a governmental
framework with geographic and institutional separation that almost guaranteed faction. Thus Adams is, at best, a highly imperfect exemplar of the liberal consensus described by Louis Hartz. Hartz sees the American tradition as having skipped feudalism to arrive at an essentially middle-class, egalitarian, Lockean consensus in which, he claimed (following Tocqueville), Americans were “born equal” without having to become so, dedicated to rights and to what he refers to as atomistic social freedom. This is a brilliant but flawed theory; it is too simple, overlooking the nonliberal aspects of the Puritan tradition and, above all, the point that the central fact of American history is the Civil War, an event exceedingly difficult to explain within the framework of an all-embracing consensus. What it can best explain, and what I think was one of Hartz’s major interests, is the relatively low level of class conflict and the virtual absence of any serious socialist tradition when American politics is considered in a comparative perspective.

Adams fits into this framework, but only loosely. Unlike Locke, he is silent on the contractual origins of the state, as well as the theory of individual rights. We can infer from his hatred of slavery that there were some rights that could not be violated, but there is nothing specific as to what they are, unless his devotion to the early Constitution can be assumed to extend to the Bill of Rights.

Still, even though Adams does not see a liberal consensus in the same way as Hartz, and even though he sees more conflict between the Federalists and the forces of democracy than does Hartz, there is a strong sense in the History that the new American nation was something special and unique, a middle-class country leaving European feudal traditions far behind. This much is entirely consistent with the Hartz thesis, which begins by arguing that America simply skipped over the feudal stage of history and became from the start a bourgeois, middle-class society. This seems to be what Adams sees in the History—the emergence of a unique American nationalism or sense of national identity, as Melvin Lyon calls it, based on the clever inventiveness of the people. William Jordy too asserts that “the theme of the History is American nationalism.”

This sense of identity is based on the acceptance of a liberal or democratic dream according to which American democracy is something new under the sun. For Adams, it is an experiment. The content of the dream is best expressed in the sixth chapter of volume one of the History, the discussion of “American Ideals.” The heart of the dream, shared by “every American, from Jefferson and Gallatin down to the poorest squatter, seemed to nourish an idea that he was doing what he could to overthrow the tyranny
which the past had fastened on the human mind.” This, Adams says, could appear to outsiders as so pompous or silly that it was hard to see its “nobler side,” but it was there nonetheless. Europeans tended not to see it but instead complained that “every American democrat believed himself to be working for the overthrow of tyranny, aristocracy, hereditary privilege, and priesthood, wherever they existed.”

The other great part of the dream was to lift the common man to a social and intellectual level on a par with the “most favored.” Ordinary people could not have articulated this ideal, so Jefferson became its principal spokesman, although, partly because he feared his own reputation as a visionary, his “writings may be searched from beginning to end without revealing the whole measure of the man.”

In spite of his reputation as an antidemocrat, Adams clearly is sympathetic to this vision and to Jefferson as its spokesman. This view is related to the theory of American exceptionalism, the idea that Americans were a unique people with a unique national destiny. Adams would become more skeptical of this theory as he saw his country caught up in the dynamics of the capitalist industrialization sweeping the Western world. His complaints about Jefferson stem from his belief that Jefferson betrayed his principles, as in the case of the Louisiana Purchase and his surrender to nationalist centralization.

But these failings of Jefferson were more personal than theoretical. Adams’s sympathy for the theory remains, though that sympathy was incomplete and increasingly bruised and battered by the debaucheries of late-nineteenth-century political economy. But it threatened to give way entirely only in the unfortunate coda to Adams’s career, primarily as expressed in Adams’s letters after he ceased writing for publication in 1910.

The emergence of what Adams called McKinleyism—the capitalist world economy later brilliantly theorized by Karl Polanyi and named by the contemporary sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein—did terrible damage to the fabric of democratic politics and, at the intellectually sad end of his life, seriously undermined Adams’s democratic commitments. As discussed in the previous chapter, by the early part of the twentieth century, Adams had pretty much abandoned reform, though he continued to hope that new thought patterns would emerge to energize the forces of change. We can only speculate why Adams was so doubtful about the possibility of any alterations for the betterment of society beyond the limited palliative of civil service reform. It may be that, given his social position, he simply had no significant contact with those most damaged by the new political economy—the working class and the small independent farmers. He perceived their plight only in distant, macroscopic terms; he could see structural but not individual problems.
Thus, in 1894 and 1895, he wrote to his close English friend Charles Milnes Gaskell that "Europe and Asia are used to accepting disease and death as inevitable, but to us the idea is a new one. We want to know what is wrong with the world that it should suddenly go to smash without visible cause or possible advantage. Here in this young, rich continent, capable of supporting three times its population with ease, we have had a million men out of employment for nearly a year, and the situation growing worse rather than better." As for agriculture, "The tiller of the soil is always being exploited by the trader and the money lender."98

Adams could see the underlying problems quite clearly, but he could not bring himself to support concrete reform actions after his brief Populist period. This reflects a peculiar characteristic of Adams's thought, a tendency to await a catastrophe in the hope that something better would emerge from the ruins, a position that is at best pointless and at worst one of the surest ways to bring about a true catastrophe with disastrous consequences. Of course, this view also reflects his growing sense that the world's political economy was in the grip of forces beyond the power of anyone to control.

This raises the question of the nature of Adams's determinist beliefs. As I have already suggested, it is only in the late scientific papers that these beliefs really seem to take over Adams's thought, and even there, he clings to his desperate hope for a new Newton to forestall the inevitable. But until the very end, Adams found it difficult to accept determinist theories. In general, he would enter a qualification to his worst fears, just as he often found the American people to be the saving grace for democracy. But the pull of deterministic science was still strong, driven, as it was, by his ceaseless quest for unity. In turn, in spite of his insistence that his was an eighteenth-century mind ill suited to the world of his own time, the commitment to science was part of the legacy of the eighteenth century to the modern world. It is surely no accident that modern science is often labeled the Enlightenment project, so that Adams's eighteenth century is closely linked to his twentieth-century scientific concerns.

While many would trace the origins of modernity to Thomas Hobbes or perhaps to Machiavelli, for Adams, the stress falls not on a political theorist but on a philosopher of science, Francis Bacon, and sometimes on Descartes or Galileo (though it must be observed that Hobbes was also powerfully influenced by mathematics and the scientific discoveries of the seventeenth century).

Adams's commitment to science is much less grudging than might appear to be the case, even when Mont Saint Michel and Chartres is taken into
account. He did not like what he believed science told him, but he tried heroically, if foolishly, not to escape from its intellectual power but rather to face up to the world as he saw it. This explains why he wrote essays such as "The Rule" and "A Letter." At the same time, this belief in science did not preclude his intellectual journey into twelfth-century France. His mind was too restless to stay tied to a single perspective on his intellectual problems. It should also be added that in making his pilgrimage to the medieval world, he spoke for more than just himself. In spite of the fact that he never connected directly with domestic progressivism, it can be argued that his "wistful yearning for the Virgin was the inner voice of the movement. More or less desperately, Progressives were seeking some way of comprehending, as well as controlling, the energies in the 'power house' of industrial civilization."

Like his great German contemporary Max Weber, Adams saw the "disenchantment of the world," the decline of religious faith, and its replacement by scientific rationalism.

Though he knew the cause to be hopeless, Adams turned to the Virgin Mary as a possible source of the "charismatic authority" that might provide a release from the domination of science, which existed in profound tension with his powerful humanistic instincts. The Weberian concept of charisma fits the Virgin exactly; hers is the "authority of the extraordinary and personal gift of grace." But Adams's sense of the presence of this authority, this glimpse of utopia, did not last even the length of Chartres. The Virgin disappears in the last three chapters, and her church is pronounced dead when she does. Saint Francis is a partial stand-in for her, but Aquinas gets the last word, however unstable his Church Intellectual may be, and Adams cannot even repress his affection for the superrational Abelard. At the same time, he surely would have agreed with Weber, who, quoting Tolstoy, tells us, "Science is meaningless because it gives us no answer to our question, the only question important for us: 'What shall we do and how shall we live?'"

But in spite of his praise for the irrationality of the Virgin—here understood as a defense against the scientific, instrumental rationality described by Weber—Adams could not embrace her faith, much as he might have wished to. Science has its limits, which cannot be transcended, but for Adams, it is all there is left to us in the twentieth century. His friend the painter John La Farge said to him, "Adams, you reason too much," to which he could only reply, "the mind resorts to reason for want of training."

No picture of Adams as an irrationalist, whatever his longings, can really be supported. Even Chartres, for all its wonderful exuberance, is very carefully reasoned and structured. Once again, had he known Weber's work, the great
German could have spoken for him. "To the person who cannot bear the fate of the times like a man, one must say: may he rather return silently, without the usual publicity build-up of renegades, but simply and plainly. The arms of the old churches are opened widely and compassionately for him. After all, they do not make it hard for him. . . . If he can really do it, we shall not rebuke him." Adams, the reluctant, critical modernist, would certainly have agreed. And yet, in the end, what remained as the last best hope was mind.  

Thus, as Samuels says, Adams is "modern man writ large." And, in a nice characterization, he dismisses his "cultivated misanthropy" and says, "He shows himself as infinitely aware of the underlying sadness of life, yet infinitely zestful of living; fearful of showing compassion, yet consumed with the desire for the good society." But I think Samuels is wrong to stress as often as he does Adams's "fundamental quarrel with modern science." Adams is queasy about the results of his scientific pursuits and fully aware that science, and the technology it breeds, creates terrible dangers on a planetary scale. Yet he is also deeply intrigued and sees no alternative to accepting science as the path to knowledge. He is so committed, in fact, that in the late essays he pushes the argument to a point where, if taken literally, it threatens to slide into absurdity. But still he remains a scientific modernist. For this reason, I think that Jackson Lears's often brilliant analysis of Adams as an anti-modern modernist is just slightly off the mark. It seems to me that the better label is critical modernist. He is fully aware of the dangers of modernity and is more than willing to discuss them, but he does not reject the sources of the dangers, nor does he see a realistic alternative to them. He asks only that we be cognizant of the possible dangers that lie ahead.

Here Adams diverges somewhat from that other critical modernist, Max Weber. As John Patrick Diggins writes, "For Weber, science meant rationalization, the development of more complex institutions of organization and control; for Adams, science meant acceleration." And what drove acceleration was technology. This raises the vexed question of technological determinism. Adams fits into a broader tradition of American literature, including many of the greatest American writers, whose idea was of an Edenic garden being invaded by the machine, though it has to be said that, whatever his feelings about technology, Adams was no pastoralist. But Leo Marx, in his book exploring this theme, is right to claim that "a sense of the transformation of life by technology dominates The Education as it does no other book."

But having said this, Marx, like so many others, exaggerates the extent of Adams's dislike of technology. Quite rightly, he points to the antitheses within which Adams works: Virgin and dynamo, the "clash between past and present,
unity and diversity, love and power.” These points are all there, but a careful reading suggests that the dichotomies are not so Manichaean as Marx suggests. In discussing Chartres, I have argued that in writing of the Virgin, Adams reveals a little-noticed sympathy for diversity, without giving up the pursuit of unity. Similarly, the dynamo has a fascination for Adams that prevents him from unequivocally taking the part of the Virgin. And he sees enough science in Thomas Aquinas to blur the divide between past and present, though of course there is a deep, nostalgic melancholy when he reflects on the lost world of Quincy. These tensions in Adams’s thought are important, and I want to insist that he is more divided between these opposing concepts than is often recognized. His sympathies do not automatically lean toward the earlier of the dichotomous choices Marx notes. Adams dreams of unity, but he does not quite succeed in finding it in his own mind. He is engaged in a constant dialogue with himself.

This is not to deny the powerful belief in technology as a driving force that, as Marx says, permeates Adams’s thought. Nor is it to deny his uneasiness with the powerful forces he discusses. Certainly, from an early age, at least part of his mind anticipated technological disaster. But at the same time, he seems to delight in taking advantage of new technological developments. It is necessary to take into account both aspects of his complex and divided mind.

The immediate problem is whether technology can be controlled, or whether it takes on a life of its own. The question is whether technology is autonomous. On one level, this is not a very useful question. George Kateb tells us, “Fear and hate of the machine are among the stalest and most pervasive emotions of modern life.” Moreover, the idea that machines can take on lives of their own and control their masters, like Frankenstein’s monster or the sorcerer’s apprentice, is a little strange. As Kateb says, “It is hard to say just what is to be done with this idea except to translate it into the less dramatic assertion that machines may exact the cost of unpleasant alterations in human life in exchange for the immense benefits they bestow, and may at times seem to be leading men to do things that serve no purpose but an endless, useless refinement of mechanical proficiency.” However, “the real danger,” he states, “is not that the increasingly subtle and potent machines of modern technology will develop a will of their own (whatever that may mean) but that they are and will continue to be used in the service of evil human wills.” This seems just about right, though it is well to remember that much modern technology is, in fact, controlled if not by men with evil wills then by men who may not have the well-being of society fully in mind or, less ominously, be unclear about the effects of the enormous forces they
command. In brief, this brings us back to the modern corporation, the modern state, and the need to control both.

This means that we need a politics of technology control. Like Adams, Weber is a critical modernist who is at one with him on a central political issue. "It is utterly ridiculous to see any connection between the high capitalism of today . . . with democracy or with freedom in any sense of these words. Yet this capitalism is an unavoidable result of our economic development. The question is: how are freedom and democracy in the long run at all possible under the domination of highly developed capitalism? Freedom and democracy are only possible where the resolute will of a nation not to allow itself to be ruled like sheep is permanently alive."114 But Weber differs politically from Adams, the proponent of civil service reform, when he writes, "The American workers who were against the 'Civil Service Reform' knew what they were about. They wished to be governed by parvenus of doubtful morals rather than by a certified caste of mandarins. But their protests were in vain."115 The difference between Adams and Weber is that Weber had a grasp of what party politics is all about. There was no reason that reform and democratic politics could not have been accomplished so that such a divide was unnecessary. However, Adams was too deeply opposed to the party system to see this, and the tension noted by Weber bore fruit in the antiparty legislation of the Progressive period, legislation that turned out to be of little use in fostering democracy. The Adams who was sensitive to power relationships in international politics was so put off by the sheer messiness of the domestic scene that he was rendered helpless, unable to make use of the key political institutions that offer the only hope of controlling the economic structures that so rightly troubled him. He was a powerful diagnostician and critic but not much good at treatment, particularly late in his career, as deterministic fancies took a larger place in his mind. He could only chide those who foolishly believed in automatic progress.

Of course, Adams is not alone in his distrust of political action. In his very interesting book on the political theory of technology, Langdon Winner is uneasy about the routines of ordinary political conflict. In one orientation toward politics, "the focus comes to rest on matters of risk and safeguard, cost and benefit, distribution, and the familiar interest-centered style of politics." Even the new, sometimes apparently radical movements pursuing ecological issues, such as Naderism, public interest science, and technology assessment, fit into this framework. They offer little that is new. "What one finds here is the utilitarian-pluralist model refined and aimed at new targets."116 Winner is right to be worried, insofar as Adams and Weber are correct about
the domination of politics by corporate interests incompatible with democracy. Under these conditions, interest-group politics is dangerous, but however unfortunate that may be, it is the only game in town if one wants to engage in politics seriously. Where Adams is handicapped is in his inability to see beyond his legitimate structural concerns about the economy and into the necessity of building coalitions with groups he does not quite trust or understand. Anyone wishing to build on Adams's theory of history must start with his diagnosis but go beyond him into a world of new alliances. This will not be easy and may prove impossible, but it is necessary for those concerned with the drift of modern technological politics to make the effort.

On an abstract and speculative level, Winner is more stimulating. Whereas we have been considering the problem of technological control through legislation, Winner suggests that we consider technology as legislation. "Different ideas of social and political life," he tells us, "entail different technologies for their realization." Unwittingly, we can build technologies that are incompatible with "autonomous, self-determining individuals in a democratic polity."

If, for example, some perverse spirit set out deliberately to design a collection of systems to increase the general feelings of powerlessness, enhance the prospects for the dominance of technical elites, create the belief that politics is nothing more than a remote spectacle to be experienced vicariously, and thereby diminish the chance that anyone would take democratic citizenship seriously, what better plan to suggest than to keep the systems we already have?"17

This sounds very much like a theory of autonomous technology and is subject to the same criticisms as any other, but it is a tolerably accurate sketch of American politics today. The question is, how much of this picture derives from technology as such, and how much from the organized institutions that create and control the applications of technology. Perhaps there is a mixture. Perhaps there are some technologies that are so appealing to so many people that they might just as well be autonomous. And some innovations—the Internet is the common example today—may have a liberating capacity by making information widely available to a potentially aroused citizenry. However, the increasing concentration in the field of technology symbolized by, to take just two examples, the proposed mergers of AOL with Time Warner and of AT&T with MediaOne does not bode well, since this may lead to constriction rather than expansion of information sources. Nor should one overlook the mounting concern over the technological potential for the invasion
of privacy. In such circumstances, to control technology requires the control of enormous economic institutions, so we are again brought back to the basic problem of finding democratic means to control large and growing concentrations of economic power. In the world of industrial capitalism, there is no escaping the central issues of a politicized economy.

Winner offers some hope for a decentralized politics, having in mind such historical examples as the Paris communes of 1793 and 1871, nineteenth-century utopias, Spanish anarchism, and worker and community councils. But the history of such organizations does not provide much hope for the present. However interesting they may be, Winner is well aware of their difficulties, so he does not devote space to proposing panaceas based on them. Instead, he lays down a set of general rules: technology should be comprehensible to nonexperts, it should be flexible and mutable, and dependency should be avoided. More generally still, he proposes a rule of what he calls “epistemological Luddism.” The original Luddites argued that if new techniques do not improve the quality of the product or the quality of work, they should not be allowed. Pursuant to this, he suggests that we need to consider “the connections of the human parts of modern social technology.”

To be more specific, it would try to consider at least the following: (1) the kinds of human dependency and regularized behavior centering upon specific varieties of apparatus, (2) the patterns of social activities that rationalized techniques imprint upon human relationships, and (3) the shapes given everyday life by the large-scale organized networks of technology. Far from any wild smashing, this would be a meticulous process aimed at restoring significance to the question, What are we about?

All this is largely unexceptionable, but it does not really deal with the political problem. Almost inevitably, the large state will be involved in any attempt to control technology. And that will bring us back to the issue of the economic domination of politics seen a century ago by Adams and Weber, though of course, not only by them. At best, it may be, as Michael Walzer suggests, that although the state will not wither away, it can be hollowed out. This would involve the democratization of institutions below the level of the state—universities, corporations, unions, and the like—along with a more general decentralization of the political system. There are some signs that this may be part of our future, though not all of it, and one ought to be very cautious about seeing such a development as a permanent trend. In fact, it may well be that some issues can best be handled locally, while others
invite global intervention. It is almost certainly the case that no single level or size of governmental unit is well adapted to deal with all problems. We may see some decentralization in some policy arenas and considerable centralization in others. Doubtless there will be a period of flux as governments and citizens try to adjust to rapid change. It is hard to say whether Adams would approve of democratic decentralization. His focus is on the state, which he distrusts, and the control of its power. I have argued that in spite of his complaints against democracy, deep down (sometimes very deep down), late in life, Adams is still a democrat. Of course, the democracy he avows is clearly representative democracy. A more participatory form of democratic rule is not part of his ideal, though if he believed that democratization at this level could help contain the corporation (which seems unlikely, at present), he might be interested. Thus, how he would feel about “hollowing out” the state is by no means clear.

Still, his real fears about democracy were activated by what he saw as the failings of a representative system. Kateb argues that representative democracy fosters certain desirable moral qualities. At its best, representative democracy leads to a certain independence of spirit, as well as to a continuous “incitement to claim the status of citizen.” Another result—in some ways, I think, the most interesting—flows from the partisan nature of the electoral system. Representative democracy entails a system in which a partial group temporarily stands for the whole. Associating authority with partisanship promotes a sense of “moral indeterminacy,” a sense that can counter the dogmatism that is potentially fatal to a democratic polity. Adams himself certainly had great independence of spirit, though how much he would have welcomed it in the electorate of a modern mass democracy is unclear. And, given the mass basis of citizenship, it is far from certain that he would have been an enthusiast for ordinary citizens claiming their citizenship rights beyond voting. He might also have been perplexed by Kateb’s last point. Surely, given his detestation of partisan politics, he would not have been happy to see the part stand for the whole, unless, perhaps, he himself happened to stand with that temporary majority. On the subject of moral indeterminacy, his views were decidedly mixed. Philosophically, he could easily accept this position, but temperamentally, he could not. Nor did he believe moral indeterminacy to be good for society. So his residual Puritan moral code took hold and led him to make absolute judgments on the failings of his time, even when his philosophical commitments told him that he had no warrant to do so. Here, as always, Adams does not fit conveniently into conventional categories.
What Adams hoped for was a version of representative democracy based on the classical theory of rule by the best, which, in the context of a democratic society, requires a deferential electorate. But the time for deferential voting had long since passed, and Adams personally had no legitimate claim to expect preference on the basis of the contribution of his distinguished family, as he sometimes seemed to believe. But his animadversions against the politics of his time were not entirely unjustified. The “best,” whoever they might be, were arguably not chosen during much of his lifetime, anymore than they are today. It may be that he thought the ordinary citizen incapable of making sound electoral choices. At the same time, it is important to recall that his most savage attacks were reserved for the political and economic elites. It is equally important to remember that he continued to believe, for all his occasional hyperbole indicating the contrary, that the people were still basically sound. What they needed was better leadership, leadership that could gain the necessary authority by being able and willing to offer plausible justifications for their policies, as Jefferson signally failed to do in the debates on the Louisiana Purchase.

It is unfortunate that Adams never codified his melange of ideas about politics into a single, coherent political theory. This may be a product of the sort of mind he had. Here again, the similarity to Weber may be worth a brief comment. Like Adams, Weber was deeply interested in politics and was tempted to give up academic life to pursue those interests. He also wrote an enormous amount about politics, even more than did Adams. And yet, as Sheldon Wolin points out, "Weber never set down a coherent political theory comparable to the great theories of the tradition of political theory. That inability may well be the meaning of social science." Of course, Adams was not a social scientist in the same sense as Weber. But he clearly identified himself as a scientific historian, which is surely close enough to make comparison fruitful. Wolin argues that theory is political in the sense that it lays down rules or principles that, "when legitimated," become the potential basis for a society—in other words, a master science in the Aristotelian sense, one "that legislates for the good of the whole." But this is something science has not been able to accomplish. Instead, even great social scientists like Weber turn their attention to methodology. But scientific methodology, as Weber well knew, cannot legitimate the values that are the foundation of a society or a political system. Thus they cannot convert power into right. As Wolin sums up, "Having undermined religious, moral, and political beliefs, the forces of rationalization had finally exposed the meaning of meaninglessness
to be power without right.” It was this intellectual crisis that prevented Weber from moving beyond historical sociology into political theory as it had been conceived historically.

Henry Adams was caught in the same intellectual vise. He too saw the grounds of his deepest beliefs undermined. Religion was long since dead; the Constitution had, in his view, been subverted; and economic barons of dubious morality dominated not only the economy but also the political system. But increasingly, Adams clung to his scientific commitment, even though his scientific competence was doubtful, and even though it led him to discover chaos rather than the unity he sought. On one level, his intellectual courage must be admired; he had the strength of mind to face up to his conclusions without retreating to positions he felt were no longer tenable. But his pursuit of scientific answers led him close to absurdity, at least if we read him literally, so that he was left with no possible way to follow his strong theoretical bent in an attempt to repair the eroded foundations of legitimate authority in American politics. Late in life, the inveterate reformer abandoned politics just when reform was most needed.

Instead of attempting to reconstruct the theoretical foundations of the American republic, Adams, leaving the History aside, became a political and social critic; although this is a fine and noble calling, from a mind of the stature of Adams's, one might have hoped for more. His criticism often took on a cynical form, a term that, in his circumstances, I do not intend as pejorative. William Chaloupka defines cynicism as “the condition of lost belief” and suggests that it is not necessarily the case that we are always better off without cynics. Cynicism may be inadequate as the only response to a situation, but there are times when it is almost necessarily part of a response. It is certainly often well suited to the role of a social critic. And in the Gilded Age, there was much to be cynical about.

The question of lost belief is very important. The composer and performance artist Laurie Anderson is also concerned with this condition, drawing, in her most recent work, on Herman Melville. She quotes the conclusion of Father Mapple's sermon in Moby Dick: “So what is a man if he outlives the lifetime of his God?” And Anderson adds, “Yes, really. What do you do when you no longer believe in the things that have driven you? How do you go on?” I think Adams was very much in the situation Chaloupka and Anderson describe. He never had religious faith, however tempted he might have been, and in his later years, his belief in the efficacy of democracy and the Constitution was sorely tried. As he withdrew from politics, unity became his great white whale, and he turned to science to help him find it. At the very
end of his career, this led him to a deeply troubling theory of history. He became preoccupied with disaster or the imagination of disaster as his irony threatened to spin out of control. And yet, in spite of the pessimism of his historical theory, his late professions of faith in the people still stand, as does the great History. Even during World War I, his harsh rebuke to Henry Cabot Lodge when he attacked President Wilson showed that he had not quit the discussion of American democracy and that, as Levenson says, he “could not [do so] without withdrawing his History from circulation.” It is there that Adams “presents the American democrat in whose mock heroic figure we glimpse the shape of greatness.” That monument remains and should be one of the foundation stones for anyone trying to build on Adams’s work. There, it is possible to revisit the early idealism of American politics. Surely it would be of great value for students of American political development to return to the deep questions raised at the end of the last volume on James Madison and make a systematic attempt to answer them.

A major theme of this study has been the deep divisions within Adams’s mind. I have also alluded to the parallels between Adams and Leo Tolstoy, particularly as the latter’s War and Peace is discussed by Isaiah Berlin. The similarities between Adams and Berlin’s Tolstoy are quite striking. To be sure, there are differences, but the similarities are more important. Thus, there is no debt to Rousseau in Adams’s work, as there was in Tolstoy’s, and although the master novelist did not deny the truths of physics, he thought, unlike Adams, that they were essentially trivial because they could not give us answers to the genuinely important questions about politics and society and, above all, to the question of how we should live. One can only regret that Adams did not pursue such questions, but at the end of his life, he had given up on them and had come close to unconditional surrender to the second law of thermodynamics. Both Adams and Tolstoy believed that men, even great men, are caught up in forces they cannot control. And each, on the evidence of Tolstoy’s novel and Adams’s History and journalism, had a vivid, almost overwhelming sense of the enormous complexity of life.

Here Berlin’s famous dichotomy dividing hedgehogs and foxes comes into play. The categories are based on the saying of the ancient Greek poet Archilochus that the fox knows many things but the hedgehog knows one big thing. According to Berlin, Tolstoy’s tragedy was that he was a fox who wanted to be a hedgehog. But his sense of the complexity of human life was too rich for him to achieve this end. “His sense of reality was until the end too devastating to be compatible with any moral ideal which he was able to construct out of the fragments into which his intellect had shivered the
world, and he dedicated all his vast strength of mind to the lifelong denial of this fact.”

Adams also wanted to be a hedgehog. This is the meaning of his search for unity. But all his relentlessly active mind could discover was multiplicity. Even near the end of his long life, when he almost completely surrendered his intellect to the demands of physics, all he could find was the dissipation of energy leading to the ultimate in disorder. Order, he said, was the dream of man, and chaos the law of nature. His attempt to find a unifying device in the laws of physics was a total failure, at least as far as politics is concerned. The words with which Berlin describes Tolstoy also apply to Adams, “a desperate old man, beyond human aid, wandering self-blinded at Colonus.”

But it is not fair to Adams to leave him in this way. No one could ever achieve unity on the desperate terms he imposed on himself at the end of his career. Let us instead celebrate and remember Adams the fox, the greatest of all American historians. The richness of his History is a wonderful legacy. In his own peculiar way, this is his testament to American democracy and its potential. It is a foundation on which others can build, even if his own work turned down another road. In Chartres and in the first two-thirds of the Education, there is also much to draw on. The Education in particular remains tremendously important, despite its flawed structure, not only because of its obvious brilliance but also because it is Adams’s most general statement of his views. The heritage Adams left us is very rich, despite his occasional wrongheadedness. No great American thinker is so exasperating. He is a deeply ambivalent writer, and it is impossible not to be ambivalent about him. As Lionel Trilling said, it is hard to identify ourselves with him for very long. Some of what Adams wrote near the end is nearly useless except as metaphor, and some of it is profoundly dangerous, though one must always keep in mind his love of hyperbole and be prepared to discount it. But I think Trilling is right to say, “We shall be wrong, we shall do ourselves a great disservice, if ever we try to read Adams out of our intellectual life. I have called him an issue—he is even more than that, he is an indispensable element of our thought, he is an instrument of our intelligence. To succeed in getting rid of Adams would be to diminish materially the seriousness of our thought. . . . Nothing can be more salutary for the American intelligence than to remain aware of Adams and to maintain toward him a strict ambivalence, to weigh our admiration and affection for him against our impatience and suspicion.”

It is not surprising that Trilling admired Adams. A recently published collection of Trilling’s work is entitled The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent,
an obligation that Adams surely felt and fully met. And since, in the end, Adams was part of the liberal tradition, he was a liberal of the type who was aware of the qualities Trilling celebrates: “variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty.” This sense of complexity is all-important. Adams had the “ability to keep two, perhaps three, ideas in mind at the same time.” This is the reason he is so difficult to fit into the standard ideological categories and is one of his greatest strengths. He is truly a multivalent thinker. At one and the same time, he can embrace science and religion, liberalism and civic republicanism, political economy and philosophy, art and culture, history and theory. The enormous range of Adams’s mind, along with his sense of the sheer contrariety of the world, is the source of much that is valuable in his thought.

Adams can tell Americans a great deal about who they are. In many ways, he reads like our contemporary. His is an enormous legacy that we ignore at our peril, for to a startling extent, his problems remain our problems. We too worry about the condition of American democracy, and many hope for a revival of its early idealism. We too worry about the rapid development of technology and its seemingly infinite capacity to shape our lives, though like Adams, we welcome its benefits. And many worry about the power of American business and the tendency for politics to be dominated by money, which is so central to both the problem of democracy and the problem of rapid technological development. It can be very useful to return to thinkers who raised contemporary problems early on. Such analyses of problems at their onset sometimes have a clarity that later statements lack. In this perspective, Henry Adams’s work stands as a lost treasure waiting to be unearthed, not least because of his recognition of complexity and his unwillingness to settle for easy answers.
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