Historical Studies, Objectivity, and the Politics of Inclusion

No one would dispute that historical studies are profoundly influenced by the cultures and circumstances in which they are written, as well as by the idiosyncratic points of view and agenda of their authors. Nor would anyone dispute that in general these sorts of influences, by introducing cultural and personal biases into historical accounts, tend to make them less objective. Everyone understands this critique.

This sort of challenge to objectivity is not confined to historical studies. In ordinary life and even in the physical sciences, people often view the world from perspectives that are inherently parochial and, hence, encourage biased representations of reality. According to the philosopher Thomas Nagel bias of this sort is the central challenge to objectivity. The proper response to it, he claimed, is to aim for a perspective that transcends local limitations. In his view, that means that we should aim for a “perspectiveless perspective,” which he dubbed the view from nowhere. Admittedly such a perspective would represent the world differently than any human has ever experienced it, or even ever could experience it. But, Nagel claims, the view from nowhere would be none the worse for that. For it would be an objective perspective—indeed, the only possible objective perspective—and would thereby afford us an undistorted view of reality. So far as objectivity is concerned, it should, therefore, be our ideal.

Grappling a century earlier with much the same problem, Nietzsche also pointed out that people tend to represent the world from partial and local perspectives. However, unlike Nagel, he claimed that there is no such thing as a perspectiveless perspective: “there is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective “knowing”. Yet, he continued, we can partially overcome the limitations to our objectivity brought about by our being tied to local perspectives by representing the world from as many local perspectives as possible: “the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will . . . be, our ‘objectivity’.” This, then, according to Nietzsche, should be our ideal, so far as objectivity is concerned, not the view from nowhere, but the view from everywhere, and not just because the view from everywhere would be the closest we can actually come to an undistorted view of reality.
Nietzsche claimed that even if it were possible, which he said it is not, to represent the world as if from nowhere we should not want to do so: “to eliminate the will altogether, to suspend each and every affect, supposing we were capable of this—what would that mean but to castrate the intellect?” In other words, according to Nietzsche, the gain in objectivity in adopting the view from nowhere would not be worth the cost of divorcing ourselves from our humanity.

I do not know whether a view from nowhere is even an option. In my view, Nagel does not explain the idea clearly and I’m uncertain whether it can be explained clearly and still remain a methodological ideal. It’s obvious from Nagel’s examples and discussion that in trying to explain what the view from nowhere would be like, he had the physical sciences in mind; nowhere in his account does he so much as cast a passing glance toward historical studies. No matter. Even if the view from nowhere were a genuine option, I think Nietzsche was right that we should not want it, at least not for the purpose of doing what I shall call humanistic history. For this purpose, Nietzsche’s view from everywhere is a better ideal. Yet, Nietzsche’s ideal needs to be explained and developed beyond what he said about it, and this in two ways: first, in describing the role, if any, that movement toward this ideal has already played in actual historical studies and, second, in clarifying whether there are any inherent limitations in how the view from everywhere might function methodologically for historians.

In developing Nietzsche’s ideal in these two ways, I shall begin by distinguishing the version of it that I want to recommend from a somewhat similar methodological ideal for historians that has been proposed recently by Thomas Haskell. Although Haskell can find little that is positive to say about Nietzsche and speaks with approval of Nagel’s account of objectivity, he seems nevertheless to stake his claim somewhere between Nietzsche and Nagel:

The very possibility of historical scholarship as an enterprise distinct from propaganda requires of its practitioners that vital minimum of ascetic self-discipline that enables a person to do such things as abandon wishful thinking, assimilate bad news, discard pleasing interpretations that cannot pass elementary tests of evidence and logic, and, most important of all, suspend or bracket one’s own perceptions long enough to enter sympathetically into the alien and possibly repugnant perspectives of rival thinkers. All of these mental acts—especially coming to grips with a rival perspective—require detachment, an undeniably ascetic capacity to achieve some distance from one’s own spontaneous perceptions and convictions, to imagine how the world appears in
another’s eyes, to experimentally develop, as Thomas Nagel would say, a view of the world in which one’s own self stands not at the center, but appears merely as one object among many.iv

My purpose in bringing up Haskell’s view, which I find quite attractive, is not to criticize it but simply to point out that while it may seem quite similar to what I am about to recommend, it is not.

For one thing, Haskell’s main focus is on the procedures to be employed in arriving at an objective historical interpretation, whereas mine will be on what such an objective interpretation would look like if we had one. In other words, Haskell’s focus is primarily on process and mine will be on product. For another, when Haskell does turn toward the question of what an objective historical account would look like if we had one, he concentrates on how to objectively justify an interpretation, whereas I will focus on what an objective interpretation consists in. He says, for instance, that “the highest fruit of the kind of thinking” that he “would call objective” is “a powerful argument,” that is, one that:

reveals by its every twist and turn its respectful appreciation of the alternatives it rejects. . . . its author has managed to suspend momentarily his or her own perceptions so as to anticipate and take account of objections and alternative constructions—not those of some straw man, but those that truly issue from the rival’s position, understood as sensitively and stated as eloquently as the rival could desire. Nothing is rhetorically more powerful than this, and nothing, not even capitulation to the rival, could acknowledge any more vividly the force and respectability of the rival’s perspective. To mount a telling attack on a position, one must first inhabit it. Those so habituated to their customary intellectual abode that they cannot even explore others can never be persuasive to anyone but fellow habituésv

I wholly concur. However, the other humans with which Haskell is concerned are historians, that is, those who interpret history, not historical agents, that is, those whose actions constitute history. Primarily for these two reasons Haskell’s view and what I will recommend are not in competition with each other..

My view, in a nutshell, is that there is an ethical/cultural imperative—a bias, if you like—that makes those historical studies to which it applies, that is, humanistic historical studies, not less, but more objective and that it does so according to an ideal of objectivity that is unique to the humanities. If this is true, it speaks to an issue that has divided philosophers of history ever since Vico. The issue is whether historians, in
pursuing an objective account of the past, should emulate physical scientists as closely as they can. My view implies that historians should not try to emulate physical scientists as closely as they can. Instead, historians, at least those who aim to produce humanistic historical studies, should march to the beat of a different drummer, not in rejecting objectivity as a methodological ideal but in the way they pursue objectivity.

The ethical/cultural imperative that I have in mind— I'll call it, the politics of inclusion—is a broadly democratic bias. It is the requirement that in humanistic historical studies the subjectivities and agencies of the various kinds of participants who were involved in the historical episodes under discussion should be represented from their own points of view and in a balanced way. By subjectivities I mean the ways in which people think and feel, including especially their thoughts and feelings about their place in society. By agencies, I mean what people intend to do, and try to do, and actually do. I shall return to the question of what it means to represent subjectivity and agency in a balanced way. In humanistic historical studies, as I shall illustrate, responding appropriately to the politics of inclusion can be crucial to explaining the meaning of historical events.

I want, then, to begin by describing what I take to be the role that the politics of inclusion has already played in historical studies. To this end, I shall use as my main example the debate among historians over the American Revolution. In my view, if one tracks this debate from its earliest beginnings to the present day, it is clear that it has gone through five interpretational stages and one interpretational transition. The interpretational stages, in their order of appearance, are Whig, Imperialist, Progressive, Neo-Whig, and, finally, the current mix of perspectives, many of which are not easily classified in terms of the old Whig-Progressive dichotomy. The interpretational transition is from that of representing the Revolution as the central episode in a saga of nation building—one that occurred over a few decades toward the end of the eighteenth century—to that of representing it (that is, that few decades long American Revolution) as a relatively minor episode in a much more inclusive trans-Atlantic social and cultural transformation that spanned two centuries. This more inclusive transformation then becomes the real American Revolution.

In the early and at the time justly celebrated Whig histories of Ramsay and Bancroft, which were completed between the end of the Revolution and the middle of the nineteenth century, it was enough to tell the story of the Revolution only from the point of view of the revolutionary elite. It was enough, that is, from the points of view of those who produced such histories and from the points of view of their intended
audiences. At the time, historians did not criticize them for doing this. But with the advent, in the early decades of the twentieth century, of Imperialist interpretations, it became necessary to tell the story of the Revolution also from the point of view of the British against whom the colonists revolted. And when Progressive Interpretations moved to center stage, a decade or so later, it was required that one break up what previously had been seen as the revolutionary point of view into a variety of different and often competing points of view. More recently, and partly as a consequence of the rise since the 1960s of social history, historians of the Revolution have been expected by other historians and by some among their larger audiences to include in their narrations not only each of the points of view that were represented in these earlier styles of interpretation, but also those of women, transplanted Africans, native Americans, and the poor, among others.

In the debate over the American Revolution—^and I think also in other historical debates, although I shall not argue the point—there has been an evolution from one interpretational style to another that began with the almost total neglect of the points of view and agencies of various groups of people who participated in the events being narrated. Later, the points of view and agencies of members of these groups were represented, but only externally, that is, through the eyes of others (e.g., native peoples, as seen through the eyes of colonists). Still later, previously neglected or externalized points of view and agencies were represented internally, that is, through the eyes of the people who had them, but they were represented as add-ons to extant interpretations, that is, only by means of material inserted into the same interpretive structures that were in place prior to historians’ acknowledging the relevance of the previously marginalized points of view. And, finally, interpretive structures were designed that are more accommodating, and designed partly because they are more accommodating, to the internal representation of the previously marginalized points of view and agencies.

The result of this evolution has been that over time historians of the Revolution have represented subjectivity and agency in increasingly more comprehensive and balanced ways. They have done this partly because they have felt that it was the right thing to do and partly because the norms on the basis of which their histories were being evaluated by other historians and by some others in their intended audiences elevated the politics of inclusion into a major desideratum.

Consider, for instance, the critical reaction to Gordon Wood’s The Radicalism of the American Revolution. Wood’s study, which appeared in 1992, is regarded by many
historians as one of the most important recent contributions to American colonial history. A main reason why it is so highly regarded is that for decades prior to its appearance, historians had been bemoaning the absence of a new interpretive framework for understanding American colonial history. In particular, they wanted an interpretative framework that could accommodate the vast amount of information that since the 1960s has been generated by social historians. A major virtue of Wood’s study is that it provided such a framework. And in seeming striking contrast to the preceding trend among historians of colonial America to characterize the American Revolution as a conservative one, Wood argued that it was "as radical and as revolutionary as any in history." According to him what made it so radical was not only, or even primarily, how it changed politics but, rather, how it changed society, in particular, how it changed "the relationships that bound people to each other."\textsuperscript{viii}

But, in one important respect, the seeming contrast between Wood and those earlier historians who characterized the American Revolution as conservative is more apparent than real. For in calling the Revolution radical, Wood was not referring to the same Revolution as these earlier historians. Wood’s American Revolution was a trans-Atlantic social/cultural transformation from monarchially-organized to more democratically organized societies that he says occurred not just at the time of the revolutionary hostilities between England and the colonists but throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries. When Wood says that “the American Revolution” was radical, he means \textit{that} American Revolution, that is, \textit{not} the few decades long American Revolution that early historians had characterized as conservative, but a much more inclusive social/cultural transformation that took place over two hundred years.

What Wood says interested him most about this transformation from monarchially-organized societies to more democratically organized ones—particularly in the incarnation of this transformation that took place in America—is how it changed the ways people viewed themselves in relation to others. He claimed that "in a monarchical world of numerous patron-client relations and multiple degrees of dependency, nothing could be more radical than the attempt to make every man independent." To the Revolutionary leaders, he wrote, suddenly "all the fine calibrations of rank and degrees of unfreedom of the traditional monarchical society became absurd and degrading." In his view, whatever may have provoked the Revolution initially, it soon "became a full-scale assault on dependency"; however, to the dismay of the Revolution’s leaders, instead of its creating a new order of enlightened Republicanism, that is, of
benevolence and selflessness, it instead bred "social competitiveness and individualism," that is, it completed the transition away from Monarchy, via Republicanism, all the way to Democracy. And, in Wood's view, it's making the final step of this transition—from Republicanism to Democracy—was a consequence not so much of organized design, as of disorganized greed. Even so, Wood concluded, by the time the Revolution had run its course, American society had been radically transformed. "One class did not overthrow another; the poor did not supplant the rich. But social relationships—the way people were connected one to another—were changed, and decisively so. By the early years of the nineteenth century the Revolution had created a society fundamentally different from the colonial society of the eighteenth century. It was in fact a new society unlike any that had ever exited anywhere in the world."viii That, in a nutshell is Wood's interpretation. I want now to survey briefly the reactions of three critics.

Joyce Appleby, whose interpretation of the Revolution is in many ways quite similar to Wood's, objects primarily to what she sees as Wood's suggestion that the transformation from republican ideals to democratic reality was brought about not by the articulation of powerful new ideals, but merely by ordinary people pursuing their economic self-interests. In Wood's account, she complains, the failure of Americans to live up to the standards of disinterestedness that define enlightened republicanism betrays the Revolution: "republicanism represents the pinnacle of civilized social order" and the transformation to democracy—ideologically as well as socially—is all down hill.ix She writes:

Only democracy comes into being without a singular will. Wood's depiction of democracy as indifferent to virtue permits him to elide the question of agency in the radical transformation he describes. Rather than detail how the opponents [led by Jefferson] of the Federalist gentry carried the day, Wood depicts radicalization devoid of intentionality except the assumed common impulse to strive for more. It [democracy] just happened when the elite made critical concessions, giving ordinary men an opening for expressing their ordinary desires. . . . [T]here is no examination of the new intellectual commitments and political organization that it took to usher in democracy.x

In other words, the problem with Wood's view, according to Appleby, is that while "monarchy and republicanism are the products of intention," democracy is merely a byproduct of self-serving attempts by people to better themselves materially. Agency has been slighted.
In Appleby's alternative interpretation, basically three things explain the "new ideological imperatives" that underlay the transition to democracy: the abolition movement, which she says "brought northern slavery to an end"; sympathetic interest among Americans in the ideals of the French Revolution, which she says gave the movement toward democracy in the United States "its epoch-making momentum"; and philosophy—in particular a view of the world and of social relationships that was inspired by Europeans, especially Locke, and articulated for America by Jefferson.\textsuperscript{xix}

In her view, had Wood attended sufficiently to agency in accounting for the transformation from republicanism to democracy, it "would have thrown up obstacles to [his] reducing democratic values to crass material striving and competitive individualism."\textsuperscript{xii} Instead, Wood's omitting from his account the philosophical underpinning of democracy leaves us "with a basket of consumables and an empty library shelf—a lot of elbowing competitors in a capitalist economy and no participants in a public debate over what is natural, what is just, and what is true."\textsuperscript{xiii}

In sum, Appleby's main complaint is that Wood does not give a balanced account of agency. She basically accepts his portrayal of agency in his account of the transition from monarchy to republicanism, but not in his account of the transition from republicanism to democracy. In Wood's view, she thinks, Americans did not intentionally create democracy; rather, democracy occurred as a byproduct of their quest for material advantage. In her contrasting view, Americans intentionally created democracy.

Barbara Clark Smith, another critic of Wood's interpretation, is decidedly less sympathetic to it than is Appleby. Smith's main criticism is that Wood neglects to mention the revolutionary activity of ordinary people, thus, encouraging a "narrow" understanding of eighteenth-century experience that constrains and limits "our sense of political possibility."\textsuperscript{xiv} She notes that some historians adopt John Adams' view that the Revolution took place in the hearts and minds of the American people well before Independence while others follow Benjamin Rush in holding that the Revolution would not be complete until American political and social institutions were transformed in a democratic way. Wood, she says, "deftly and ambitiously incorporates both emphases: his revolution is a long revolution, and it happens twice": first, in the transition from a monarchical society that is obsessed with dependencies based on patriarchal authority to a republican society and, secondly, decades later, in the transition from republicanism to democracy. In this latter development, she notes, "Wood finds the 'real revolution,' a transformation that took place in the nineteenth century."\textsuperscript{xv}
Smith says that Wood gave "various and conflicting indications" of what was radical about all of this. One of his themes is that revolutionary leaders "adopted a radically new way of seeing themselves and their world" by imagining and then daring to embrace "the notion that men of humble origins might merit political rule." But within pages in Wood's account, she says, the achievement of these patriot leaders "melts into air" and "readers learn that the Revolution was not republican at all" and the revolutionary leaders accomplished little. She notes that Wood says that Independence itself was merely a "clarifying incident." Powerful demographic and market forces displaced the Revolutionaries' goal of a virtuous citizenry and a reformed society. And with the coming of the Jacksonian age, "Americans faced the limits of human virtue, dismissed their utopian ideals, and accepted the invisible hand of self-interest as the basis for social and political life. In Wood's account, she says, what made the Revolution radical was not republicanism, but the transition to democracy.\textsuperscript{xvi}

Smith main complaint about all of this is that, in her view, Wood tends to keep 'the Revolution' in the hands of an elite." She objects that he sees ordinary people not as they saw themselves but as they were seen by elites and that he omits discussion of those parts of the resistance movement that had most to do with ordinary people. One of the ways he does this, she thinks, is by providing very little information about the political resistance itself--little to nothing, say, about the Boston Tea Party, the Boston Massacre, the Sons of Liberty, the women mobilizing to boycott tea and take up the spinning wheel, the merchants and artisans negotiating over terms of non-importation, the committees of correspondence feverishly linking inland villages and seaports, and so on. In downplaying these incidents, she says, "readers receive no picture of the unfolding of resistance, the moves and countermoves of different actors, the reluctance of merchants and the energy of artisans; the fears of indebted slave holders as they faced fervent evangelicals and unruly African-American workers.\textsuperscript{xvii}

For instance, Wood does not consider, she continues, whether the relatively humble patriots who joined the Revolution actively shaped the coalition and contributed their own understandings of events. If there was something radical about the era, it seems, it could not be ordinary people's capacity for interracial alliance, for running away, rising up, contesting the law and otherwise presuming their own competence to occupy a public terrain, or even the tendency of patriot leaders to ally themselves and negotiate with those who were socially beneath them. So, she continues, the long sweep of Wood's Revolution, from colonial society to Jacksonian America, takes place at the surface, absent a careful account of the agency of artisans, sailors, and foot
soldiers, and even absent an account of the full daring of elite patriots, who staked their all on their inferiors’ willingness and ability to resist constituted authority and to commit themselves to liberty. Wood "sets sail," she concludes, "leaving Jack Tar on shore."xviii

Of course, no one can tell the whole story. But, according to Smith one can and should tell a balanced story. She criticizes Wood for failing to do this. For instance: what interests Wood most about African-American slavery is whether that institution was conspicuous to eighteenth-century Euro-Americans. (His preoccupation with that issue underscores how greatly the book is about what only some Americans saw.) Other historians have taken the denial of slavery as a historical fact of extraordinary significance; Wood takes elite subjectivity as unproblematic. Most slaveholders and others saw no evil, Wood tells us, as if that were all we need to know about them or as if theirs were the only subjectivities that mattered. Surely African-American slavery was conspicuous to some Americans; it depends on who was looking. Yet a host of people remain throughout Wood’s account merely the object of others’ acknowledgment or denial.xix

In sum, "Wood's revolution," she says, "takes too much credit." It “slights the agency” of those who struggled to end slavery. And it "elides the actual experience, the small gains and setbacks, the lived struggle for freedom and for dignity and meaning when freedom could not be reached." "When Wood does note the agency of ordinary people," she says, "it is ultimately to dismiss the significance of their actions." In other words, in her view, Wood gives an unbalanced view of the subjectivities and agencies involved in the Revolution and as a consequence misunderstands what was radical about it. "One is left with the impression," she says,"that Wood's purpose is less to discover American radicalism than to avoid acknowledging radicalisms of the wrong kind."xx

Like Appleby, Smith is worried about Wood's sins of omission. But the omissions that worry them are different. In Appleby's view, Wood's sins of omission occur primarily in the second part of his story; in Smith's view they occur throughout. For Appleby, the problem is not so much that Wood's account is elitist--after all, the main person she wants him to take into account more fully is Jefferson--but that only the views of Republican elites are mentioned. For Smith, on the other hand, the problem is not that Wood ignores the ideological underpinnings of democracy, but that he doesn't adequately portray the experiences and actions of ordinary people. Both Appleby and Smith accept Wood's view that the Revolution was radical, but disagree with him as to
why. For Appleby what was radical about the Revolution included the development of a
democratic ideology, for Smith it included the radicalizing of ordinary people.

One thing that is especially interesting about Smith’s criticism, given the thesis
about objectivity for which I want to argue, is its ethical/political basis. In her view,
Wood’s omissions in accounting for the Revolution are disgraceful importantly because
they send the wrong political message. In Wood’s interpretation, she says, "for
Revolutionaries we look to the Founders and for radicalism we ultimately look to
impersonal demographic and commercial forces." As a consequence, she thinks, by
"harnessing our approval of the Revolution to nineteenth-century capitalism, [we are]
making mobile, competitive, and individualistic elements of the Jacksonian era not just
revolutionary but American Revolutionary, hence worthy of celebration and deference."

In other words, Smith is worried about the legitimatizing impact of Wood’s
interpretation. She endorses Nathan Huggins’ view that “the master narrative” of
American history is one "within which slavery and racial caste can be held apart as sad
‘exceptions’ to the true American story" of “the inevitable if sometimes slow expansion
of liberty under the auspices of the American state.” According to Smith “what is left out
and unexplained thereby” is not only the agencies of ordinary people but also "society’s
central and persisting issues,” one of which is that in Wood's account “women of any
circumstance figure largely as an absence.” She says that in Wood’s view, “the
Revolution failed to liberate women in this period, although it would do so later.” But,
she insists, it was people, not the Revolution, that would ultimately liberate women.
"The Revolution was not a transhistorical agent that could go marching through the
ages to bestow economic, social, or political rights on waiting womankind. Women’s
inequality was a presence in the nineteenth century, and present with it were
ideological visions of women’s nature that have profoundly affected female Americans
for over a century."

Smith says that, contrary to what Wood claims, the ”Revolution did not bring
about a full scale assault on dependency” so much as a reformulation of dependence
that banished it from the consciousness of the public world, set apart African
Americans, children, women, tenants, and other poor people, remade the American
state, recast forms of participation, and constructed a narrative of the Revolution and of
American-ness without their aspirations, experiences and agency." She concedes that
for Wood such arguments may “appear to be quibbling, stressing the things the
Revolution did not do, when in fact it accomplished so much.” In his view, she notes,
"the Revolution made possible later movements for abolition and women’s rights and,
indeed, "all our current egalitarian thinking." However, according to Smith those movements and that thinking have also taken place "against the weight of the American past," for the Revolution not only extended but it also contained liberty. It offered a particular heritage of participation, particular possibilities for public life, but not others. "There are few losses in the successful Revolution painted by Wood," she says, "hence few possibilities for imagining American freedom in terms not well within its compass." In his account, she says, "material abundance and mobility" pose "as substitutes for participation in a public realm."

But what is worse, Smith continues, "these developments are not just described but universalized and celebrated." "Given the power of the narrative of the American Revolution to frame our sense of identity, the nation, and the politically possible," she says, "we are in danger of concluding, with Wood, that "nothing could be more radical than" these aspects of the American case. It would be a pity, she thinks, for us to leave out of account the many Americans and Revolutionaries who dissented from that view and, thus, to get the meaning of the Revolution wrong, and by getting it wrong to send the wrong message. If we have to legitimize something, she thinks, let's legitimize not capitalism but the continuing struggles for freedom of ordinary Americans.\textsuperscript{xxii}"

The harshest of any published criticism of Wood's account with which I'm familiar is that of Michael Zuckerman. He says that Wood's account is "not integrative, or integrated, or for that matter even very interesting" but, rather, one that is "utterly and authentically in what Santayana called the genteel tradition":

[It] confines the American Revolution and America itself to what the better and often the best sort wrote. It allows other Americans to appear primarily through the accounts of those in positions to pronounce upon them and it presents them as an undifferentiated mass not because they were but because their betters saw them that way and because Wood identifies profoundly with their betters. Zuckerman, then, like Smith, is bothered that Wood's account is elitist and by being elitist doesn't give an accurate and balanced portrayal of subjectivity and agency. "Wood simply excludes from any consequential place in his account," Zuckerman complains,

the vision and the violence, the soaring and sometimes outlandish ideals, the seething and sometimes appalling passions of ordinary Americans. Or rather he transmutes them all into simple ambitions of economic success. And in the exact tradition that Santayana scorned he sets those transmutations forth in a bland parable of irresistible individualism, a comfortably conservative tale of a people
finding its destiny and fixing it forevermore, a self-satisfied study of how, in the words of the dust jacket, "a revolution transformed a monarchical society into a democratic one unlike any that had ever existed."xxiii

The reality, Zuckerman thinks, is both messier and more interesting.

So, like Appleby and Smith before him, Zuckerman is worried about what Wood leaves out. But whereas what mattered to Appleby was Wood's omission of the ideology of democracy and to Smith his omission of the experience and agency of ordinary people, what matters to Zuckerman is Wood's way with everyone's experience and agency, especially those he ignores, but even those he does not:

I don't want to belabor what Wood leaves out, except to say that even on his own terms those elements matter far more than he allows. His inexplicable elision of slavery from the story of advancing equality misses the effect of the institution on masters as well as slaves, misses Jefferson's anxiety that black servitude "nursed, educated, and daily exercised" whites in "the most boisterous passions" and "the most unremitting despotism," misses, in other words, the ways in which slavery precluded inculcation of the kind of character Wood claims republicanism and democracy alike required.

Zuckerman concludes that aside from a few "delectable details" Wood's account is "essentially untouched by life."xxiv

For present purposes what is interesting about these three critiques is not whether they are right or wrong—Wood, it should be noted, responds forcefully to all three—but what they show about the ways in which historians debate the merits of competing interpretations. What they show, rather dramatically I think, is that humanistic historical interpretations such as Wood's are expected to reveal not only what happened and why but also to convey the meaning of what happened against the backdrop of a balanced portrayal of the experiences and agencies of the people whose history is being interpreted. Moreover, these experience need to be represented from the points of view of the people who had them.

What has all of this got to do with the view from everywhere? What has it got to do with objectivity? As we have seen, Thomas Nagel characterized an ideal of objectivity that is supposed to capture its essence. In his view, those who strive for objectivity should aim for accounts that transcend every partial and local perspective, and thus represent the world differently than any human has actually experienced it. But, as these criticisms of Wood's account make clear, among some contemporary historians there is another way of transcending the limitations of partial and local
perspectives, and that is to enter into them. While Nagel’s strategy may (or may not) be available to natural scientists, this latter strategy of entering into perspectives clearly is available to historians, and it is available only to historians. A historian is a humanistic historian, in my sense of these words, to the extent that he or she employs this strategy in framing his or her interpretation.

What Nagel’s strategy and this more humanistic strategy have in common is that they are both attempts to transcend bias that results from dependence on a local, limited perspective. However, one attempts to transcend bias by abstracting away from all local perspectives, and the other by entering into them. In short, the difference between the physical sciences, ala Nagel, and humanistic history is that whereas physical scientists, in trying to be objective, may want to aspire to the view from nowhere, whether or not they can actually achieve it, humanistic historians, in trying to be objective, both can and do aspire to the views from everywhere, and the ideal itself seems to be within grasp.

Or is it? I turn now to the second goal of this paper, which is to consider whether there are any limitations on how the view from everywhere might function as an methodological ideal for historians. One question that arises immediately is that of saying whose perspectives need to be represented. This is not a problem for the view from nowhere since no one’s perspectives are represented. But what about in the view from everywhere? Is it enough if representative perspectives and agencies of all major groups involved in the episodes under consideration are portrayed, or must one also include the perspectives and agencies of every individual who was involved? And why stop with humans? Why not insist on including the perspectives even of animals? To push the view to its logical limit, why not insist on including the perspectives of every sentient being?

Currently historians and their critics seem to be content with representing the perspectives and agencies of all major groups involved in the episodes under consideration. Perhaps, though, in lumping all indentured servants and all slaves together, they do not even succeed in addressing all major groups. Just as the Progressives opened up new access to the colonial area by demonstrating that among American revolutionaries there was no such thing as the American Revolutionary point of view, but rather there were a multitude of different and often competing revolutionary points of view, perhaps the same is true of some of the groups—mainly the dispossessed—who currently tend to be regarded by historians as if they were monolithic.
No doubt historians of today stop where they do in representing the subjective perspectives of groups and individuals for one or the other, or both, of two reasons: historians are not able to go further, and historians see no need to do so. No one knows what the Revolution was like for all sentient beings, or even for all humans who were involved in it, and even if we did know, we may not want to hear about it. Perhaps we just don’t care. But who is the “we” that doesn’t care? Primarily it is historians themselves and their professional critics, the people who review their books. In other words, if taking the view from everywhere to its ideal limit would illustrate what a completely objective historical account would be like, then even if it were in principle possible to have a completely objective historical account, there may be limits to how objective we want our historical accounts to be. In the view of Wood’s critics, his account fell woefully short of these ideal limits. We know enough now, they claimed, to provide an account of a sort that we—the critics—would like to have that is more inclusive of subjectivities and agencies and, hence, more objective than Wood’s account. Thus, in their view, Wood’s account is seriously flawed. But, say, seventy years ago Wood’s account would not have been regarded by most professional historians as being flawed for these same reasons.

The brief history of interpretations of the Revolution provided above reveals that disciplinary views have changed about how inclusive historical accounts are supposed to be. If we accept the view from everywhere as a criterion of one sort of objectivity in historical studies, then disciplinary views have also changed about how objective historical accounts are supposed to be. When Whig historians ruled the roost, few Americans cared about the fact that lots of perspectives and agencies were being left unrepresented in Whig histories. Probably the omissions never even occurred to them. However, had slaves been reading these histories, it might have occurred to them that their subjectivities and agencies were not being represented and if it had occurred to them, presumably some of them may have cared. But we have no record that slaves were reading Whig histories of the American Revolution. And even if slaves had read them and objected, it is unlikely that professional historians would have even heard them, let alone listened to them. Slaves were not among the critics whose voices they were attuned to hear.

Over time things have changed. Now professional critics of historical works, especially perhaps in the United States, routinely insist that the representative perspectives of members of marginalized groups get represented in humanistic historical accounts. But we are still pretty crude about how we understand the issue of
which groups and individuals need to be included. For instance, while today we may want the perspectives of indentured servants and slaves represented, no one, so far as I know, seems to be too worried about whether there were significant differences in the points of view of indentured servants and slaves. Today, one indentured servant is as good as another. Perhaps a hundred years from now, we will want a more differentiated account.

But should we want more even now? From our present vantage point it may seem that historians of the past should have wanted more. We can understand why they did not want more. They were limited by their own cultural heritages just as we, no doubt, are limited by ours. One of the values of formulating the view from everywhere as a methodological ideal is that it reveals some of our own limitations. Most of us don’t care as much as we might about the subjectivities and agencies of the dispossessed and of non-human animals. Or, at the very lease, we don’t care as much as future generations of historians and their critics will probably care. Should we then welcome the prospect of expanding the scope of our concerns, even now? One cannot formulate the view from everywhere as a methodological ideal without drawing attention to this question. It is not easy to see how it should be answered. If the view from everywhere reveals what it is for humanistic historical accounts to achieve objectivity along the dimension of portraying subjectivities and agencies, our current reluctance to go farther than we have gone in portraying subjectivities and agencies suggests that there are limits to how objective we want our historical accounts to be.

Notes


iii. Ibid.


v. Ibid., p. 304.


vii. Wood, ibid., p. 5.

viii. Ibid., p. 6.


x. Ibid., p. 682.

xi. Ibid.

xii. Ibid.

xiii. Ibid., p. 683.


xv. Ibid., p. 685.

xvi. Ibid, pp. 685-86.


xxv. By *the views from everywhere*, I mean the view from every perspective that was occupied by humans who were involved in the events being narrated.