

## INTRODUCTION

**D'Maris Coffman, Nicholas Di Liberto and Harold James**

The diverse essays in this volume reflect Jonathan Steinberg's methodological pluralism and insatiable curiosity for historical questions which cross disciplinary and geographical boundaries. Animating students, colleagues, friends and wider audiences with his enthusiasm for 'thinking about the past' was his vocation, one that he pursued with unmatched enthusiasm. Through this collection, we hope to convey something of the intellectual range, analytical purchase and moral purpose of his historical writing and teaching.

One feature of Jonathan's inspiring and charismatic lectures was his unique ability to combine an analysis – always fresh, never pre-cooked – of big historical structures and trends with an acute awareness of the importance of individual personalities. His interest in structural analysis is reflected in all of his written work, in *Yesterday's Deterrent* and in *Why Switzerland?* and, probably most strikingly and rigorously, in the comparison of German and Italian wartime mentalities in *All or Nothing*. The culmination of his deep probing into the human psyche that occurred in all of the undergraduate and general lectures came late in his career in powerful form in the masterful biography, *Bismarck*. What made that book so insightful was the fresh portrait he painted of how the monarch, King and later Kaiser Wilhelm, was a substitute father to the German politician and how the political relationship which moulded the constitution of Imperial Germany was the outcome of the family dynamics in the upbringing of future 'Iron Chancellor' – the distant father and the emotional mother. In developing this analysis, Jonathan went far beyond other biographers, even beyond Otto Pflanze, who spent his life writing and then rewriting his Bismarck biography after taking a turn from diplomatic history to psychoanalysis.

There are other features that deserve emphasis. There was a concern for structure, but also an awareness of the importance of chance. Jonathan was also amusing about this, and looked for illustrations in his own biography: he liked to tell the wonderful story of how he became interested in Germany, as if it were not obvious that the son of a famous rabbi should be interested in the cultural and political origins of the greatest crime of the twentieth century. After he trained as a medical orderly to deal with shell shock, or post-traumatic distress, his personnel file apparently had slid behind a radiator so that he was not sent to Korea. But in early 1950s Germany, where he went instead, there was (supposedly) no shell shock in the US army, so he had plenty of time to investigate Germany and the German problem. Or, there was the story of his work in the Warburg bank in Hamburg, at that time still oddly named 'Brinkman und Wirtz', after the 'aryanizers' of the late 1930s. Thus, Jonathan always had a good eye for the links between structure and chance that drive both politics and market developments. He also understood that history was deep; it was about strange identities and about the profound alienness of past mentalities.

One other attribute is worth recalling. Jonathan had a sense that a moral argument depended on his historical case, so he refused to let anyone else try to overturn that case. When he came to give a seminar at the Davis Center in Princeton in the late 1980s, when that seminar was run by the formidable Lawrence Stone, there was a firm ritual about the event. It started at 10:30 and NEVER went on after 12:15. Jonathan's talk ended with a comprehensive statement by Stone about what was wrong with the paper that had been presented. Jonathan wasn't going to take that, so he hit back with a vigorous riposte. Lawrence insisted on the last word, so he made another intervention. And so on: the meeting went over the time limit for something like half an

hour. It was like being at a tennis match with a rally that goes on and on, with balls being slammed ever faster into ever more distant corners of the court.

Jonathan was a real pioneer of what is now called, in a term that had become too trite and complacent, transnational history. *Yesterday's Deterrent* was about the interactions not just of diplomatic strategies but of different British and German mental worlds. *Why Switzerland?* is also inherently comparative, in the sense that one of the driving questions is how the Swiss path came to be so different from that of its neighbour in the north, Germany. And the essence of *All or Nothing* is the comparative approach. It is therefore helpful as a way into Jonathan's intellectual world to follow Ben Mercer's careful dissection of comparative and transnational history. Mercer shows how a tendency to vagueness is an inherent flaw in much of this writing, and what analytic strategies are needed to combat the danger. Gesturing beyond the comparative framework, transnational history has been concerned with the attempt to correct a perceived neglect in much national historiography of processes and movements that cross national frontiers, with the goal, also, of provoking greater awareness of the historian's role in the construction of historical knowledge. Yet, transnational history has offered none of the same empirical insight or methodological innovation that the older comparative work aimed to achieve. Likewise, global history's case against the nation as a unit of analysis is rendered problematic by the stubborn persistence of nation states themselves into an era of apparent 'globalisation' and by the difficulties ideas, concepts and historians have in crossing the linguistic and physical boundaries that separate them.

Georg Kreis' contribution examines precisely the problem of national historiography in a field in which Jonathan Steinberg made a notable contribution, one of many foreign observers of Swiss history and culture. The Swiss case reminds us that nation states are not naturally occurring

phenomena, neither are their historians always without personal and professional biases; and although one might expect external observers of the Swiss case to produce analyses more critical than native scholars, in Kreis' view, the works of many such 'foreign' authors have tended to reify simplistic versions of national character that, when nurtured by personal sentiment, incline some to make excuses for the idiosyncrasies of an alien culture. In Steinberg's case, while a Swiss national character shaped by geography, languages and the longevity of its republican political culture made an ideal case study, he nevertheless was under no illusions that the Swiss presented as a monolithic national culture. Indeed, for him, their longstanding democracy had been undermined by recent events.

Steinberg, of course, believes in national character, or, more precisely, that 'The rich compound of language, habits, tradition, architecture, social structure, laws, history, climate and geography that give a place its specificity is undeniably "out there" in reality.'<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps a historical irony, explored in *All or Nothing*, that nothing surprised Italy's leaders more than the fact that their German allies meant what they said; i.e., that the Nazis embodied an extreme example of German national seriousness in their commitment to exterminate a people and rule the world. National character, then, is not the 'real' object of historical analysis; rather, comparing perceptions of national character help the historian explain the incongruous and unexpected that would otherwise escape the conventional narrative reconstruction of the past.

In *All or Nothing*, Steinberg relates the historian's difficulty in representing the synchronicity of the past with the diachrony of narrative history and laments, 'There ought to be a sort of historical polyphony in which all themes develop independently but the listener hears them as a whole. Instead, like all writers, I have to put one word after another.'<sup>2</sup> Of course, the reason

historians can gain perspective on past events that would be impossible for historical agents immersed in them is precisely because historians are removed from the polyphony.

Alan Allport tests Steinberg's comparative history of the mutual misperceptions of Italians and Germans by using an external point of comparison: British soldiers' and their leaders' views of Italians and Germans in the last stages of the Second World War. Allport demonstrates how British perceptions of their enemies' national character had much more to do with the anxieties of their own self-understanding since the last war. Visions of Italian weakness and congeniality, of German vigour and blind respect for authority to the point of murderous inhumanity, were the tropes used to rebuke a British society that had let its youth go soft. At the same time, these images of the enemy provided the reason why the calm, steady determination of the free-thinking British soldier would triumph over the fanatical authoritarian personality of the German, or the childish caprice of the Italian. While Allport calls these stereotypes of national character at one point 'nonsense', these myths enabled the British to maintain their determination to fight Nazi aggression and to believe, in the Italian case, that a degree of common humanity might still exist on the other side.

Harold James applies Steinberg's Cold War metaphor in *Yesterday's Deterrent* to an American–German dialogue of more than a century ago, which also raises the interpretative issue of whether the other culture is peaceful or aggressive: the search for financial reform in the early twentieth century, and specifically in the aftermath of the 1907 financial crisis. Two brothers are the focus: Max Warburg in Hamburg (the man who built up the bank in which Steinberg later worked) and his younger brother Paul in New York. The institutions that they designed, a revised approach to the management of the German central bank, but above all the US Federal Reserve System, were seen as instruments to promote national security.

Also taking Steinberg's work on Tirpitz and the German Navy as a starting point, Jane Caplan expatiates a different manifestation of maritime life, and its human significance, in a time when tattoos accompanied the rise of the German navy and became a symbol of personal virility as well as national resurgence. She then examines the career of the German folklorist Adolf Spamer, whose work understood and interpreted this popular and apparently ephemeral phenomenon and provided the conceptual vocabulary for the new discipline of *Volkskunde*.

In picking up Jonathan Steinberg's interest in the historical value of life-writing, D'Maris Coffman's piece highlights Steinberg's view that historical understanding requires a range of methodological approaches from the quantitative, social-scientific to the 'softer' literary and biographical. Using the example of Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, and combining biography, bibliography and reception history, Coffman demonstrates how Clarendon's less appreciated miscellaneous writings can provide insights into more than just his personal beliefs and tragic experiences; they can also be read as important moments in the acculturation of the ideals of what Norbert Elias called the 'civilizing process'. A once exiled statesman, victim of the uncertain politics of Restoration England and an ungrateful monarch, who never fit into the emerging political divide, became the archetypal embodiment of the values of conservative moderation and self-control. Later generations of Tory conservatives would come to accept, as a matter of course, the 'acculturated' views on manners, education, familial duty and morality that, in his own time, Clarendon's 'lesser' writings had only thematized for family and a narrow circle of friends.

In a piece inspired by Jonathan's deep interest in personality as a force in history, Chris Clark explores how the volatile mixture of personal relationships and political structures shaped the career of Joseph 'Sepp' Dietrich, a thuggish, uneducated man whose proximity to Hitler and

capacity to win the leader's confidence put him on the road to a high military command, despite the poor esteem in which he was held by his military colleagues.

In a tribute to Jonathan Steinberg's own Leslie Stephen lecture, Michael O'Brien examines Leslie Stephen as an advocate of transatlantic conversation, and his acute awareness of the difficulty of intercultural translation. Can a foreigner understand a really quite different culture? Or do you need to be a foreigner to really do that? After all, Americans too often see the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville as the clearest explainer of what the new American nation meant. O'Brien specifies the worry about what happens when the particular dissolves into the general.

Jonathan Steinberg shared O'Brien's concerns, but he framed the discussion in terms of how far historical thinking could be called 'scientific' and why such a designation might matter.

Steinberg first engaged that debate through a review article he published forty years ago in the *Historical Journal*, which at the time was a kind of house journal for the Cambridge History Faculty.<sup>3</sup> In it, he explored the contributions of philosophers of history to debates about the reality of the historical past. The two positions he identified, realist and idealist, were framed around questions of the ontological reality of the past and the epistemological problems of knowing it. In the intervening decades, debate has largely been superseded by the questions raised by the 'Linguistic Turn' about the possibility of a reality outside language and, in any case, was only secondarily interested in history as scientific knowledge. Presumably, for those philosophers, if history could be shown to be scientific, it was only because it dealt with a real human past. In Steinberg's discussion of their ideas, he proposed the plain English definition of history as the 'science of human beings in time'.

The question, of course, is what exactly does that mean. If history is a science, does that mean that all the knowledge it generates must be stipulated as ‘scientific?’ More to the point: what kind of science is it? And if we label something a ‘science’, particularly in the English language, what assumptions have we made about its truth claims, its disciplinary allegiances, rules of discourse and about other forms of knowledge that we may or may not rightfully call scientific? As Jonathan was fond of asking students, if we say that ‘history is the science of humans in time’, does that imply a direct comparison with geology (the science of rocks in time) and astronomy (the science of extra-planetary objects in time)? To be sure, geology and astronomy are not self-sufficient disciplines. As descriptive sciences, both survive today in the academy because they draw heavily on the experimental findings, tools and methods of chemistry, physics, mathematics (at least in the case of astronomy) and biology. But what seems to distinguish history from those two disciplines (apart from its subject matter) is its use of and, in fact, reliance upon narrative in both its poetics and its rhetoric. The subject matter too is problematic. Human motives and actions even in aggregate are not easily quantifiable or experimentally reproducible; they have to be interpreted. In this sense, and in the sense that it produces texts even when it does not use them as evidence, history is a *hermeneutic science*.

Steinberg was thus not afraid to call historical thinking scientific; it was systematic thinking about the past that produced an organized body of knowledge. But historical knowledge differed from knowledge in the natural and social sciences because history had to deal with objects of its analysis that were also *subjects*. History, therefore, constituted a special form of knowing common to all the human sciences, a mix of fact, analysis and intuition. Despite, or rather, because of its ‘soft’ character, historical science required the rigorous use of sources and evidence and also the imaginative understanding to render that interpretive work into a narrative

that could be communicated to and debated with others. History was, for Steinberg, above all else, a conversation about the past, and into that conversation he warmly welcomed other disciplines. As history increasingly expands its scope to questions of how human culture mediates between consciousness and environment, in subdisciplines like the history of medicine and disease, climate and ecology, as well as the more encompassing environmental history, historians borrow methodological procedures and empirical data from the so-called ‘hard’ sciences and use it in such a way that the objectivity of the natural scientist’s analysis is revealed to depend, much as it does in history and the humanities, upon imaginative interpretation and drawing metaphorical connections to make quantitative and empirical data intelligible to other human beings. Historians should not be so content to accept its ‘soft’ status if that means its findings will be more easily dismissed as perspectival opinions.

In an analogous exercise, then, in which a different and equally important aspect of Jonathan’s work is presented, Alison Liebling and João Costa use their empirical work on the social relationships in prisons to explore how the fundamental concept of what is human – and specifically how human dignity – matters. They show that social science can go wrong when it neglects this fundamental, less quantifiable human need for recognition. Although the results of their interviews, focus groups and surveys rely on subjective feedback from oftentimes antagonistic sides of the prison community, Liebling and Costa insist: ‘There is a better way, which we can defend on empirical grounds.’ Historians can and should be equally sure of their attempts to understand the human past, as it is in Jonathan’s words, ‘a process of change which is not random or arbitrary but subject to certain regularities and trends that we can define and hence grasp as hypotheses subject to evidence’.

Jonathan Steinberg's service as an expert witness in 1992 for the Commonwealth of Australia War Crimes prosecution of Beresowky and his work in examining the Deutsche Bank's gold transactions during World War II were in turns painful, difficult and heroic acts to balance society's need for justice with the equally important requirement to ensure probity and due process. In her piece, Joanna Wade elaborates another central aspect of the legal system, where, much like the problems historians face in articulating the motivations of historical agents, solicitors and judges must understand the emotional investment of petitioners to have their cases heard. Like Dickens' unfortunate characters in *Bleak House*, plaintiffs will often persist in their claims even when the chances of an advantageous settlement have become hopeless and the continuation of their complaint self-destructive. That solicitors too often interpret their role (and the basis for their fees) as enablers of their client's lost causes, judges can at least exert more of a guiding influence towards reason and away from the syndrome of endless litigation.

Historians often find the personal and individual reflected in and against the more general expectations about a society and a political culture. As an immigrant to Britain, Jonathan Steinberg admired Beveridge's welfare state as it evolved in the post-war period. Harold Carter combines a structural and a comparative argument in his analysis of the development of the British welfare state. Heavily influenced by the discussion of the German model, it produced increased expectations and then, as these were disappointed, an erosion of confidence. That led to a return or reversion to the older problematic: as Carter puts it, a revival of the older, nastier language of social exclusion.

Kristen S. Childers takes a different tack on the development of the welfare state in France as she examines how political uncertainty at home and the threat of German aggression from abroad drove interwar France to adopt an innovative and progressive institutional structure to

demonstrate the strength and moral legitimacy of the state. State responsibility for social welfare and family policy represented a continuity between the Third and Fourth Republics, and the Vichy regime between them. Social policy was devised not just as an answer to the well-known French anxieties about low fertility and demographic decline but also as a model for a universal approach that would be transmitted in a sort of race to the top promoted by the League of Nations. But, as the example of France's former colonies demonstrate, debates about the universal right to social welfare have always depended in France, as elsewhere, on who counts as citizens and, in the particular French case, on how ethnic, religious and gender identities conform to the modern image of the French secular state and its more traditional notion of the ideal, reproductive family.

Expectations about the role and constitution of the modern family come to life vividly in Tara Westover's case study of the reform community established at Modern Times, New York, where the ideas for utopian communities in Europe combined with religious movements like Mormonism in the United States in reformers' attempts to treat, morally and scientifically, the 'family question'. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Steinberg took religion seriously as an object of historical research, and understood both the place of religion in organising and disciplining family life and the role of religious institutions in cultural life.

In homage to Steinberg's engagement with Catholicism, Casey Hammond looks at how an unlikely version of the life of St Francis, authored by a French Protestant, helped late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reformers to develop a modern vision of Catholic renewal, but one that nonetheless remained very traditional in its view of Catholic devotion to the church. The long story of Catholicism's interactions with modernity is followed up in the subsequent chapter. John Pollard gives a typology of religious and radical conservative movements in modern Italy,

using the experience of the ambiguous relationship of the Catholic Church with Mussolini as a template for how religion and politics interact. Conservative Catholic organizations and groups have maintained close but unsteady relationships with right-wing, neo-fascist cultural movements, even though the 'metapolitics' of the latter have often promoted secular and even pagan beliefs. The church seems all-to-willing to collaborate with neo-fascist, racist groups provided they share in its anti-modernism with respect to the family, gender identity and abortion.

In an analogous exercise, Frank Domurad looks for structural continuities between the traditional world of local 'hometown' politics and the 'modern' economic and social developments in the Hanse free city of Hamburg. He thereby determines at the local level how Weimar-era politics, usually discussed in terms of its modernism, issued from the experiences of profound alienation in the development of 'bourgeois' identity, as expressed in the provincial discourse of guilds and corporative bodies against 'disturbers' of the traditional social relations and mentalities of 'hometownsmen'.

Returning to Jonathan Steinberg's need to reconcile structural developments with the vagaries of fortune, Thomas Childers uses personal letters, eyewitness accounts and archival sources to produce an almost novel-like account of the convergence of different destinies in Regensburg right at the end of the war: the victims (mostly non-German political prisoners) forced on a death march from the concentration camp at Flossenbug; the American air force pilot Dick Farrington, who by simple chance commanded the last B-24 shot down over Germany; and the heroic anti-Nazi priest Father Johann Maier, moved not by chance but by God to his courageous sermons of resistance. Childers' vivid narrative portrays the human face of the war and the enormity of Nazism's crimes in the convergence of these figures' common fates. Although Steinberg may

have eschewed for himself the license taken in this kind of literary history, he nonetheless acknowledged the importance of history's imaginative capacity to capture 'that combination of physical presence, speech patterns and facial expressions, style in thought and action, virtues and vices, will and ambition, and, perhaps, in addition, a certain set of characteristic fears, evasions, and psychological patterns of behaviour that make us recognizable a "persons", the selves we project and conceal, in short, what makes people *know* us.'<sup>4</sup>

In 2020, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the questions and the possibilities that excited Jonathan Steinberg about a lived human past remain particularly relevant, as regional and national governments, multilateral organizations, religious institutions and global relief agencies grapple in different ways with the implications of both the disease itself and the enormous economic disruption it has caused. Jonathan Steinberg understood that in 'thinking about the past', we are ultimately, of course, 'talking about the present.' As we celebrate his life and work, we look forward to taking Jonathan's lessons with us into the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Steinberg, *All or Nothing: The Axis and the Holocaust, 1941–43* (London: Routledge, 1990), 229.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Steinberg, "'Real Authentick History" or What Philosophers of History Can Teach Us', *The Historical Journal* 24, no. 2 (June 1981): 453–74.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.