

# WHY WE NEED A LIBERAL THEORY OF HISTORY

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For many people history is one of the more futile academic disciplines. It does not convey any useful or “relevant” information and is the domain only of romantic novelists and antiquarian scholars. To judge by the published record, many in the modern libertarian movement share this view. Since the early 1960s there have been many books setting out liberal arguments in the fields of philosophy, economics, and political thought. To put it another way, people in all three disciplines have contributed to the development of liberal argument and analysis. History presents a marked contrast. There are few published works which reflect an explicit liberal perspective and there are no equivalents in history to Hayek, Friedman, and Nozick. This poses a puzzle. There are probably as many people with liberal views and convictions among historians as among economists and philosophers but this is not reflected in the printed record. While much empirical work has been done and doughty blows struck against the more egregious excesses of marxism there are few if any works which embody a clearly articulated liberal theory of history. It is this lack, of a liberal theory of historical method and of the course of history, which accounts, in my view, for the relative lack of a historical input to the liberal movement.

## EVERY SERIOUS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY HAS A THEORY OF HISTORY

The obvious, and marked, comparison is with marxism. There is a recognisable body and tradition of marxist historiography, produced by eminent scholars such as Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson and Genovese. These works are explicitly theoretically aware in that they are exercised by questions of theory and seek to use that theory to structure their historical explanations and accounts. This is also history with an overt purpose, to assist in the propagation of a particular ideal or ideology by showing how that ideology explains the past and hence the present. The influence of this body of historiography is wider however, since there are many who, while denying explicit adherence to the ideology, make use of its models and categories, of its theory of history. These are those whom the French term “marxisants” as opposed to “marxistes”.

Does any of this matter? My answer is, emphatically, yes. It matters for three reasons. It weakens the intellectual and persuasive power of liberal theory; it weakens the effectiveness of other disciplines; and it is bad for the actual discipline of history itself. The lack of a theory of history and of a body of explicitly liberal historiography is, in my view, the biggest single weakness of the contemporary liberal movement. Every serious political philosophy has a theory of history. Without one it will be unable to produce any truly profound analysis and will be fatally weakened in the battle of ideas. The other side of this particular coin is this: the practice of history must be informed and structured by theory at every level of analysis. If not, then historians will degenerate into antiquarians and chroniclers and will not make their full contribu-

tion to the growth of human knowledge. Other disciplines will suffer from the lack of a historical perspective on their own particular subject matter.

Since this is a contentious point, I must spell out why the study of history is important both in itself and as part of any general social philosophy. Firstly one cannot understand the present without having some knowledge, and understanding, of the past. Everything that exists in society today is the outcome of the actions, beliefs, and desires of people, most of whom are now dead. The nature of contemporary institutions, beliefs, and social structures is largely delimited and determined by their history, i.e. by those events and processes which have generated them. Entities such as political orders, social classes, and patterns of belief are neither abstract ideas nor brute facts simply existing in the present. They have a historicity, their existence and nature are only explicable in terms of past events. Thus the nature of the world we inhabit can only be properly grasped if its past is known and studied.

Secondly the study of history is central to any theory or account of development. Not all human cultures have such a thing. For mediaeval men for instance the past was thought to be much the same as the present, with Troy a walled town with bells and church towers and Hector and Achilles knights errant. The inhabitants of the Inca empire had no knowledge of their past (it had been destroyed by the Incas) and thought that they had always been ruled by the Inca state. What distinguishes history from chronicle or antiquarianism is the historian’s awareness, first that the present is different from the past and secondly that change is not just random and contingent but ordered and meaningful. The study of history is central to any account of how what once was became what now is.

Thirdly, some historical knowledge, however rudimentary, is part the “mental furniture” of every person who can lay claim to any kind of education. This collection of beliefs and assumptions about the past plays a central part in determining their views and attitudes. In many cases the influence of historical notions is all the more powerful because they are unexamined, part of a body of prejudice and assumptions rather than conscious belief. One case is the part notions of history play in many people’s sense of their own identity. For example the concept of nationhood is central to many individuals’ sense of who and what they are. However that concept derives from a particular way of construing the past and hence from a set of beliefs about past events. The same point can be made about class or religious identity.

Besides these general arguments for the importance of history there are particular reasons why any social and political philosophy should include a theory of history. The most important is the role of historiography in education and the spreading of ideas. For every person who has come to a particular political position through the study of political thought there are a hundred who have reached it by way of history. In the nineteenth century historians such as Acton, Grote and Motley did more to disseminate a liberal world view than even economists. Two entire generations came to liberalism through reading Macaulay’s *History of England*. Since historiography plays such a large, if indirect, part in forming most peoples’ opinions it follows that historical interpretation is crucial in determining their political stance. For example it is clear that popular attitudes to industrial capitalism and the welfare state derive largely from the historiography of the industrial revolution and the history of social policy.

Moreover, historical investigation is vitally important in legitimising or criticising the status quo. consequently, arguments over historical interpretation can often have very physical consequences. To give just two examples: in seventeenth century England the “myth of the Norman yoke”, a particular interpretation of the Norman conquest, was used to legitimise opposition to the monarchy and aristocracy; in nineteenth century America debates over the history of the US constitution and Declaration of Independence were at the core of arguments about slavery and state sovereignty. In fact, history is, in Gramsci’s words, the battleground of political theories. Debates over the interpretation of certain historical events or periods become tests of the validity of competing philosophies and the means whereby they are sustained in public debate. Sometimes a specific interpretation of the past becomes the main element in



## Historical Notes No. 33

ISSN 0267-7105 ISBN 1 85637 441 6

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,  
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the larger ideology. Thus marxism is primarily a theory of history, and an analysis of post 1400 European history in particular, which is held to prove or demonstrate general propositions about the nature of human societies and their development. These propositions can then be applied to the contemporary world. The converse of this argument is as follows: if the historical analysis is overthrown, by empirical research or theoretical criticism of method, then the larger ideology will be severely, even fatally, injured. The demise of the two main schools of liberal historiography and their associated theories at the turn of the century was a major element in the disintegration of liberal doctrine at that time.

Finally, there are two rather more specific reasons for liberals to take an interest in history. It is possible to learn from the past. In particular we can learn how liberal institutions have come about, how they have functioned, and how they have been subverted. One can also discern how entire societies have developed and what factors have historically encouraged and sustained liberty and prosperity. Secondly, it is important for contemporary liberals to be self-aware of their place in history, to know of the thoughts, ideas and analyses of past thinkers and of the historic struggles, victories and defeats of activists. For one thing this can save a great deal of wasted effort. The radical feminist Dale Spender has observed that in every generation women put forward the same arguments and critiques but these are then forgotten and lost sight of. This means that each generation “reinvents the wheel”, repeating the work of its forbears while believing themselves to be breaking new ground — all because of a lack of historical perspective. The identical argument can be made, with equal justification, about today’s liberals.

### A COMPLETE THEORY OF HISTORY

To return to the argument advanced earlier, why does the study of history require a theory? Surely, the historian’s duty is simply to study the relevant sources, determine what the facts were in the matter at issue, inwardly digest and then present a reasoned argument on the basis of those facts. To this way of thinking an historiographical work which is driven by a theory held before the sources were studied is bad, biased history, regardless of whether the theory in question be liberal, marxist or anything else. This argument is nonsense — and dangerous nonsense too. Clearly, no historian of integrity will seek to distort the record or ignore information which undermines a cherished thesis. However, the actual extraction of data from sources is only one part of a more complex process. Neither the research itself nor the interpretation of the information gained by that research can take place without reference to some kind of theory. It is preferable that theory be explicit and consciously held; if it is implicit and unarticulated then the analysis will not be sufficiently critical and rigorous. As Hayek puts it:

It is more than doubtful whether a connected history of a period or of a set of events could be written without interpreting these in the light, not only of theories about the interconnection of social processes, but also of definite values — The writer who attempts it without being aware that his task is one of interpretation in the light of definite values also will succeed merely in deceiving himself and will become the victim of his unconscious prejudices.<sup>1</sup>

A complete theory of history contains four elements or levels. At the most basic level is a theory of the subject itself; that is a definition of the subject matter of history, the types of sources to be drawn upon, the methods of investigation and analysis, and the fashion and manner of the finished product. Matters at stake here include the relative importance of political, social and other types of historical subject, the relative value of written sources as compared to oral and archaeological evidence, and the differing claims of narrative and analysis as the most appropriate genres for the historian to use. This level or element of historical theory is closest to pure philosophy, being concerned as it is with such topics as the nature and motivation of human beings and human action, the nature of human society in the abstract, and the nature and certainty of historical knowledge.

Less general, but still fairly abstract, are large scale theories concerned with such extensive topics as the general origins of settled

agricultural societies, the ultimate origins of the state and power, the nature and role of war, and the nature and extent of historical development or progress. This level also includes theoretical explanations of such large scale historical phenomena as the “rise of capitalism and decline of feudalism”, the growth of the modern state, the “decline of the ancient world”, and the “European miracle”. Here we are concerned not with pure philosophy but rather with general models which seek to structure and explain historical processes which take place over prolonged periods of time and large areas of the world. This kind of theory is also concerned with questions which will exercise any historian of any period or place.

The third level is the kind of theory most familiar to students of history and the one which liberals are today most comfortable with. That is, theories which explain particular, relatively limited historical events and processes, such as the American or French revolutions, the “industrial revolution” in England, the Reformation, or the development of intellectual thought during the eighteenth century. Many historians, including not a few liberals, would argue that this level of theory is all that is required. This is simply incorrect. A theory of, for example, the American revolution, is inevitably based upon, or embedded in, higher level theory. So, for example, a historian of that topic is making assumptions about the nature of revolutions in general, the relative influence of ideas and interests, the historical location of the American revolution (i.e. its relation to other events such as the French revolution, the English Civil War, and the Enlightenment), and the relative value of different types of source material. What one must realise is that the denial of one theory is itself an implicit theory. So, to deny that there is any general pattern of revolutions which can help us to understand the American revolution is to embrace a different theory, that revolutions are singular, political events, produced by autonomous political actors and contingent happenings.

The final component of a theory of history is somewhat different from the rest as it consists not of theoretical propositions concerned with history or historical events but rather general principles of right and wrong, good and bad, which enable the historian to make moral and evaluative judgments. It is here that political and moral philosophy intersect with the practise of history. Clearly, a socialist, a liberal, and a conservative are going to bring very different perspectives which may lead them to evaluate the same event in different ways. So for example, they will take very different views of the industrial revolution or the growth of the modern state. This is not a matter of bias. The historian who exercises judgment openly is being honest and forthright and is fulfilling one of the most important responsibilities of any intellectual. The ducking of this responsibility is one aspect, not the least disreputable, of the pervasive moral relativism of modern academia, which, as people as varied as Chomsky, E. P. Thompson, Hayek, and Sakharov have argued, can have very dangerous consequences.

A theory of history then must contain propositions about history in general, about major historical processes, and about particular events or periods. It should also have an element of moral appraisal, derived from adherence to a particular moral or social philosophy (which need not be political). Great works of history use all of these explicitly and integrate them through a narrative or analysis. This can be seen in the works of historians such as Gibbon, Maitland, Parkman, and Gardiner, to give four “classical” examples, or in the writings of such contemporary figures as Elton, Braudel, Schama, and Finley.

When historians try to write without a theory then assumptions are smuggled in rather than spelt out and value judgments are implied instead of being stated. Because theory is an essential element of explanation, since it shapes both research and the interpretation of that research, the attempt to do without it is disastrous, crippling explanation. The practice of history then becomes fragmented and particularised with massive production of detailed empirical studies of often minute topics which are never put into any context. One is reduced, like the hero of Amis’s *Lucky Jim* to writing on topics like “Developments In Venetian Shipbuilding Technique 1483-1485”. History of this sort is rapidly degenerating into antiquarianism.

One should also be aware of all of the different levels of explanation and theory. In British academic life, much historical theory has not gone beyond the third level. This means that larger scale propositions are uncritically accepted even when the detailed study in fact undermines it. One striking example of this was the way a particular model of seventeenth and eighteenth century English history was accepted although detailed studies had undermined it fundamentally — even by those doing the undermining! Only when writers such as Clark and Christie rejected the whole theory and replaced it with another was the scale of the change in understanding apparent. A striking example of the unconscious acceptance of general theories which influenced particular studies was the history of states and legal systems which until very recently took certain theoretical propositions as given i.e. that public order and civil peace are produced by and dependent upon a strong state and that the rise of sovereign territorial states was natural, inevitable, and progressive i.e. “a good thing”.

Two caveats should be entered at this point. Although theory is essential this clearly does not diminish the importance of empirical research. Arguing the importance of theory should not lead one to the structuralist position that it is theory which determines fact and hence no way of determining which of two theories is in best accordance with the facts. The historian should aim to follow Popper’s arguments regarding the nature and growth of knowledge. A good theory is one which is testable, i.e. disprovable, by empirical research. An honest historian will often find that the model held at the start of research has to be amended or even abandoned in the light of that research. A case in point is the way the work of the History Workshop school has undermined the thesis they sought to celebrate, that of Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class*.

Moreover there must be a limit to the depth or extent of the theorising. History is a middlebrow discipline which cannot and should not be concerned with abstract metaphysics — these should be left to philosophers. In other words certain things must be taken for granted. If not history will suffer the same fate as other disciplines such as sociology and literary studies. The former no longer have any clear idea of the content of their discipline and spend their time and energies on questions such as “what is truth?”. The pitiful state of literary studies, the prey of Derrida, Foucault and other such charlatans, should stand as a dreadful warning.

### THE DECLINE OF LIBERAL HISTORY ...

When a number of scholars are working within the same large scale theory or model, applying it to specific instances and seeking to develop or amend it, then we can speak of a “school” of historians. This implies awareness by the historians concerned, of the theory they are using, of its use and development by their predecessors and of their own place in an evolving body of historical narrative and analysis. During the nineteenth century there were clearly two such schools of liberal historiography yet by the 1920s both had almost vanished. Why though did this happen and what were its consequences?

The nineteenth century produced a galaxy of great liberal historians. Macaulay, Hallam, Freeman and Acton are some of the English names which spring to mind. Less well known today but equally important were figures such as Buckle, Grote, Robertson, Lecky, and Thorold Rogers. On the continent there were such luminaries as Thierry, Sismondi, Mommsen, and Guizot. Many of these were active in politics, Liberal as well as liberal: Guizot, Freeman and Macaulay are obvious examples.

It is not my purpose here to elaborate upon the theory expounded by these people, at least not in any great detail. The essential features can be readily spelt out however. Firstly methodological individualism, with a corresponding stress upon individual free will, the role of outstanding individuals, and the importance of abstract ideas, which were seen as in some degree autonomous. Secondly a notion of human beings as essentially rational creatures, with an underlying human nature that persisted through historical and cultural change. Thirdly, an empirical, document oriented research method. Most significant was the concept of history as progress. This was seen to have four main elements; economic development,

the rise of free societies, the increase of rationalism and humane-ness, and the growth of nationality. Contrary to what is often asserted, none of the great liberal historians saw this as inevitable or foreordained. They rather emphasised how slow and erratic progress had been and how close it had come to being extinguished. Certain events and periods were seen as being of crucial importance. The Norman conquest, English civil war and revolution of 1688, and British constitutional history in general all received great attention. Other periods and events of interest included the Reformation, the history of classical Greece, the fall of the Roman republic, and the fall of the Roman empire and the “dark ages”.

The historians mentioned did not of course hew to any narrow orthodoxy. There were often sharp disagreements over particular topics. Moreover there was a broader division between the more moderate, “whiggish” history of people such as Guizot and Macaulay and the more radical, “libertarian” history of, for example, Buckle, Thierry, and Thorold Rogers. The first group gave primacy to political history whereas the latter emphasised what we would call “total history”, with an emphasis on the reconstruction of the life of ordinary people and the importance of such matters as folkways and the influence of the physical world through climate and terrain. This was linked, most explicitly in Thierry’s case, to a radical type of class analysis: in Thierry’s words “most history so far written has been the history of the ruling class, of oppressors, we should seek to write the history of the productive classes who supported them”. The aim of this school was, to use contemporary terminology, to write the history of civil society.

By the 1920s however both varieties of the liberal theory of history were in deep crisis. This found expression in the comment of one of the last great members of the school, H. A. L. Fisher, who declared “men wiser and more learned than I have discerned in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. These harmonies are concealed from me. I can see only one emergency following upon another as wave follows wave”.<sup>2</sup> Even more extreme in his disillusion was a contemporary of Fisher’s, Conyers Read, who compared the course of history to Macbeth’s definition of life — a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

The consequence of this “failure of nerve” was the effective demise of consciously, theoretically sophisticated, liberal historiography. The few historians who can be recognised as working within that tradition, such as Trevelyan, Gooch, Rostovzeff, and Hecksher appear as survivors from a bygone age — which was how they saw themselves. There were still many liberals engaged in the study of history, names such as Butterfield and Powicke come to mind, but there was no longer an explicit theoretical basis to their work. Indeed, partly in reaction to marxism, many liberal historians came to espouse an aggressive anti-theory, positivist approach.

As a result the twentieth century saw the rise of anti-liberal theories of history which came to shape historiography to such an extent that by the early 1970s they were clearly dominant. The most visible was marxism, represented in the English speaking world by a series of outstanding historians such as Dobb, Hobsbawm, Anderson, and Genovese. Their influence was such that by the 1970s they had come to set the terms of debate with non-marxists forced to use their opponents models and agenda and, because of that, many of their assumptions as well. Less visible but also highly influential, were the English tory historians such as Elton, Trevor Roper, Cowling, and Oakeshott. As the academic crisis of marxism progressed during the 1980s this school became increasingly visible and dominant, with outstanding work being done by younger scholars such as Morrill, Macfarlane, Clark, and Cruikshanks. There were other schools as well, most notably the radical feminist historiography which showed explosive growth after the mid 1970s, the structuralist history of the “Annales” school of Braudel and LeRoy LaDurie, and most recently the deconstructionist “history” of writers influenced by Foucault. All of these schools had one common feature; they were hostile to liberalism.

### ... WHY IT HAPPENED ...

Why did this great intellectual revolution happen? In part it was just one aspect of the general intellectual decline of liberalism during the middle part of the twentieth century. As classical liberalism

decayed so did its distinctive historical perspective. However there were several specific, “internal” reasons for the demise of liberal theory in history. One was the changed nature of academic life. From the 1890s onwards academia became ever more professionalised, dominated by full time academics working in enclosed institutions, who spent most of their time communicating with each other rather than a wider public audience. In this environment the generally anti-liberal ethos of the intelligentsia has flourished. In much of British academe the only alternative to various anti-liberal perspectives has been either a naive empiricism and positivism or else the “anti theory” of the tory historians. There were some important figures who resisted this trend, notably Hartwell, Challoner, Hexter, and Plumb but none of these, apart from Plumb, spelt out their own theoretical position. Plumb’s own views, articulated in works such as *The Death of The Past* were clearly liberal, but of a revisionist variety.

More significant than academic structures however, were the crucial failures of liberal theory itself. The classical liberal theory of history proved unable to account for several of the most significant events of the present century. The Great War was a shattering blow for liberal historians. It was very difficult to uphold a theory of progress and growing rationality after the events of 1914-1918. Such things could not happen in an “advanced” society according to liberal theory — yet they had. The theory also proved unable to come to terms with the phenomenon of totalitarianism or modern imperialism. The nature and workings of modern politics in general did not fit easily into liberal models. Notions of economic development were weakened by the series of deep depressions which started in the 1880s and culminated in the 1930s. These failures of explanation derived from defects in the theory itself which became more apparent with the passage of time.

Firstly, it was too narrowly focussed. This was not the case where the more radical historians were concerned but they were in the minority. For the majority the study of history centred upon the investigation of states, governments, and power. Not enough attention was paid to other aspects of history, especially the lives and struggles of ordinary men and women. Consequently, when professional historians came to investigate such areas, they often did so from an explicitly anti-liberal position. Classical liberal historiography by and large failed to develop an adequate social theory. Those who had one, such as Thierry and Thorold Rogers, were undermined by the eclipse of their model of class and exploitation from the 1890s onwards. All this reflected the second main weakness, the lack of an adequate theory of development. This was partly the consequence of a failure to do research but primarily due to the theoretical weaknesses of classical economics.

There was also a crucial confusion over the issue of nationalism, reflecting the way this question posed problems for liberal theory in general. For most liberal historians history became the past of nations and nation-states. This often led to profoundly anti-liberal methods of research and conclusions. Moreover, it led the historians to concentrate their attention upon an inappropriate and often anachronistic unit of analysis, the nation state. This severely distorted the history of all non-European cultures and of Europe before the eighteenth century.

Perhaps the most significant fault however was a failure of radicalism. By about 1890 much liberal historiography had become much too conservative in its implications and argument. It had become a theory and body of argument which justified the status quo. The course of history was seen as a process leading to an almost realised conclusion — the division of the “civilised” portion of the world into sovereign, liberal-democratic nation states. As the world which this model portrayed as the “end of history” went under after 1818 so the theory was left high and dry. No wonder Fisher and Conyers Read despaired. If the result of history was World War I, fascism and bolshevism then what was the point of it all? Moreover the conservative implications of this type of history meant that when historians came to write history from a perspective which was critical of the established order, they did so using categories, models and language which were hostile to liberalism.

One particular reason for the demise of liberal history was the successful demolition — successful in the eyes of its critics — of a

major element in much liberal historiography, a particular model of British constitutional history. This model, “whig history” in the strict sense, was simply wrong in certain respects and the flaws were sharply exposed by historians such as Round and Maitland. A similar fate befell other standard liberal accounts, such as their version of the American revolution, the English civil war, and the Dutch revolt. This was not always justified, being often the result of fashion rather than genuine criticism but enough damage was done to have a serious effect.

### ... AND WHY IT MATTERS

As one might imagine, given the arguments spelt out earlier, the consequences of this demise of liberal history have been far reaching and ultimately disastrous. Without the support of a liberal theory of history, liberal argument has lacked any historical perspective and has come to be dominated by the discipline of economics. While the economists have made a tremendous contribution to the cause of freedom their arguments are inevitably limited: no one discipline can encompass all of human knowledge and experience. Also many people are not moved or persuaded by purely economic argument; as I pointed out earlier, history has a very profound effect in the shaping of popular attitude and opinion. Much liberal argument has cut little ice in the face of what people “know” to be historical fact. The overall intellectual cohesion and effectiveness of liberal theory has been weakened by the lack of an historical component. In the case of marxism, history has served a crucial role as the integrating discipline bringing together insights from politics, philosophy, cultural studies, economics, and sociology. This kind of integration has been missing in liberal discourse.

Moreover, the other disciplines mentioned have suffered in liberal circles from the relative lack of a historical input. Just as economics for example can give valuable insights to the historian so history can serve to inform and check economic analysis. Some of the wilder, more abstract flights of economic fancy would not have got off the ground had they been confronted by historical information. Also the discipline of history itself has clearly been impoverished by the relative absence of a liberal perspective which has left the field open to other ideologies. This has meant that the research agenda has been set by non-liberal priorities and areas of interest to liberals such as the history of legal pluralism and the untold story of mutual aid have remained uninvestigated.

Most serious though has been the impact on the mindset of the public in general and liberal sympathisers in particular. The great mass of historical evidence which supports the case for liberty, in demonstrating the connections between free economies and both prosperity and freedom for instance, has been largely lost sight of. Information which might lead many people to question contemporary received wisdom, such as the ample evidence of the successful provision of public goods by private means and the widespread historical existence of functioning and stable legal pluralism, has not been available. The awareness and historic sense of the majority have been shaped by profoundly illiberal theses, whether socialist or tory. The classic case is the way that a particular picture of the effect of industrialism and the fate of the working class at that time has come to shape popular attitudes towards capitalism and the unrestricted market. For their part, liberals are often shamefully ignorant of their own place in history, knowing little of their own antecedents and the often inspiring and elevating history of past struggles for freedom. In fact a crucial front in the war of ideas has simply been vacated. Individual generals have fought on but there has been no grand strategy.

Over the last thirty years the case for liberty has been increasingly heard in the land. Yet all of this will go for nothing if we do not have a contribution from the historians as well as the economists and philosophers, one which is as self-conscious and theoretically aware as that from those disciplines. The time for the rebirth of a liberal theory of history is long overdue.

### NOTES

1. F. A. Hayek, “History and Politics”, in *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, Routledge, London, 1967, p. 202.
2. H. A. L. Fisher, *A History of Europe*, Edward Arnold, London, 1936, p. v.